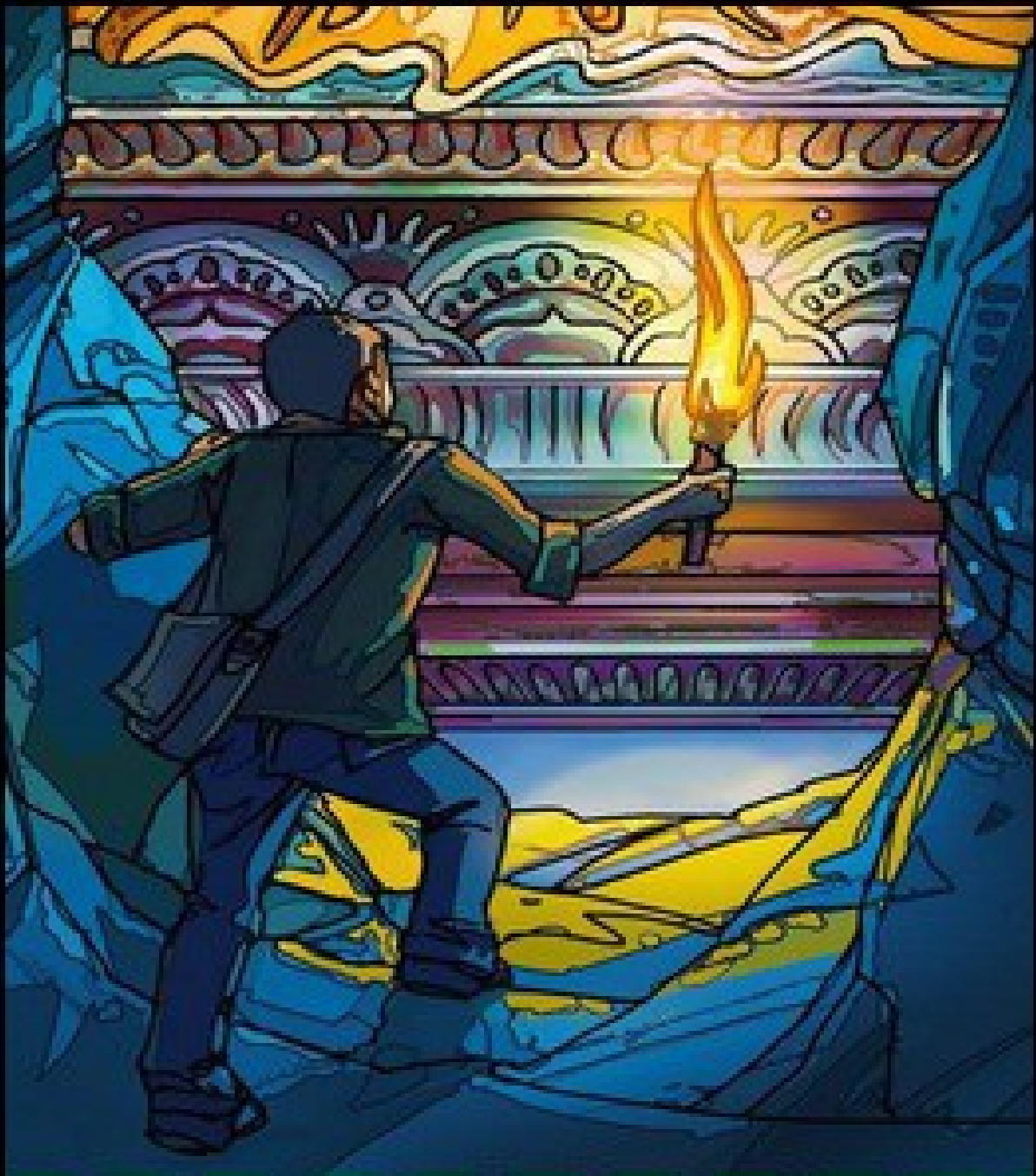


THE INVESTIGATORS in

THE MYSTERY OF THE TEMPLE OF JUSTICE

PART I: RESURGENCE OF THE FIERY EYE





in

**THE MYSTERY
OF THE
TEMPLE OF JUSTICE**

Part I: Resurgence of the Fiery Eye

The Three Investigators go on an excursion to an abandoned mercury mine and get into trouble. Soon after being reprimanded for their actions, Jupiter goes missing. While Pete and Bob are desperately searching for their friend, they stumble across clues that relate to an old case of theirs—‘The Mystery of the Fiery Eye’. They realize that this case has not been solved back then. New developments have come forth revealing that the Fiery Eye holds more secrets than they can imagine.

The Three Investigators
in
The Mystery of the Temple of Justice
Part I: Resurgence of the Fiery Eye

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Translated, adapted, and edited from:

*Die drei ???: Feuriges Auge
Teil 1: Der verschwundene Detektiv*

*(The Three ???: Fiery Eye)
(Part I: The Missing Detective)*

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(2018)*

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(2022-06-18)

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1. Trapped in a Mine

Sunday, 14 September

Pete Crenshaw was fed up. It was cramped, it was warm, and it was stuffy. Besides, he could hardly see anything in the twinkling light of the old miner's lamp. In some places, the passageway was just wide enough that he didn't scrape his shoulders against the walls. The ceiling hung so low that he had to watch his head, and the ancient wooden beams that supported the tunnel walls did not make a confidence-inspiring impression either.

Pete didn't understand why he was stumbling through the tunnels of an abandoned mercury mine in Elizabeth Lake instead of lying somewhere on the beach. He had long planned to finally laze around doing nothing for days! However, Jupiter Jones had had other plans, and Pete had let himself be persuaded—yet again. He didn't know who he was more angry with—Jupiter or himself.

"Jupe, let's turn around!" His voice echoed hollowly off the rock walls.

"It can't be far now," Jupiter replied, walking in front of him. He held the oil lamp as high as the ceiling would allow. Unlike Pete, he seemed downright excited.

"I don't care," Pete countered. "If we don't turn back soon, someone in our group will realize that we are not with them, especially our tour guide... uh... what's his name?"

"Timothy," Jupe replied.

"Yeah, Timothy..." Pete continued. "We should also stay on the marked routes, he has said that a hundred times. This is not a marked route!"

"Timothy said it twice, not a hundred times," Jupe argued.

"So what? These tunnels are in danger of collapsing!"

"That's just what they're saying to stop people from finding out the secret of the mine."

"Jupe, please, there is no secret! You don't seriously believe that the Croft brothers hid their loot from the bank robbery down here ninety years ago and in all that time no one has found the money?"

"It was a cash-in-transit robbery, not a bank robbery."

"Man, Jupe, you're getting on my nerves! Bob, why don't you say something?"

Bob Andrews, the third in the group, had been very silent for some time. "I think it would be better if we went back too, Jupe. Pete is right. We know that the Croft brothers were hiding in this mine after their escape. Surely the authorities would have searched everywhere here!"

"They did. I'm not saying that the loot from the robbery is hidden in these tunnels."

"Then what?" Bob asked.

"I read that there are mysterious inscriptions on the walls here, possibly from the Croft brothers. Maybe they left a message—perhaps a clue to the real hiding place of their loot!"

"And no one ever discovered this clue?" Pete questioned.

"Discovered, yes, but not decoded. You need a bit of brains for that. Ah! We're here!"

The narrow tunnel widened into a slightly large cavern. The ceiling was still terribly low, but at least Pete no longer had to fear being crushed by the walls.

Jupiter put the lamp on the ground. "This is the cavern I read about. This is where the inscriptions must be."

“There!” Bob pointed to some letters carved into the rock.

They walked closer. Pete tilted his head and frowned. “‘Gabriel loves Susan’,” he read out. “‘Jonathan was here’, ‘Class 9 on Secret Expedition’, ‘AC/DC Rulez’... Anyone who comes here to read this is stupid. Tell me, are you pulling our leg, Juve?”

Jupiter could feel the dismay. He looked around, but these student scribbles were the only inscriptions on the walls. “I don’t understand—” he murmured. “This is the right cavern, I’m quite sure of it.”

“I understand that very well,” Pete growled. “Somebody was joking! Enigmatic inscriptions from the Croft brothers, ha! Where did you read that from? On ‘believe-everything.com’? Or was it in the magazine ‘1,000 Stupid Ideas for Bored Investigators’?”

“I... I really thought—”

“Yeah, I get it. You thought you’d find a treasure here. You dragged Bob and me along when we both had other plans! And for what? Whoever comes all the way here to read this is stupid! That’s great, Juve. I’m leaving now!”

Pete grabbed the lamp and backed away so abruptly that he promptly hit his head on a support beam. “Ouch!” Furious, he trudged on. Bob and Jupiter could barely keep up.

Pete expected to reach the illuminated visitor route they had left. It was all the more surprising when the path they were on suddenly ended and they were back on the visitor route—but in the dark!

“There were lights here earlier,” Bob remarked.

“Yes,” Pete grumbled, “and now they are switched off.”

At that moment, the small flame of the miner’s lamp died. Darkness enveloped them.

“Well, great. We’re out of oil. The route lights are out because the tour group has left the mine by now.”

Pete dug out a small laser pointer hanging from his key chain and switched it on, but the tiny red dot did not illuminate the surroundings one bit. Pete let it dance across the walls anyway.

“It was the last excursion for today, by the way,” he continued, annoyed. “Last one turns out the lights. Great, Juve! Now we’re stuck in this mine—in a mercury mine! Do you know how harmful that is to our health?”

“You’re not supposed to stay down here for a week,” Jupiter replied irritably, “and speaking of health hazards, I’d be obliged if you turned off your laser pointer. It can blind you if the beam hits your eye.”

Pete bounced the red dot provocatively over Jupiter’s stomach. “We’ll be down here for weeks, Juve. This was the last excursion for this month. It said so on the schedule when I got the tickets. Great!”

“Don’t be guided by your feelings all the time when assessing challenging situations, Pete. We’ll get out of this!”

“Now calm down,” Bob said, but no one paid any attention to him.

“I didn’t want to come here in the first place!” Pete replied.

“Then why did you come?”

“Because you were whining all the time!”

“Whining is not in my nature. I was merely pointing out to you that an unsolved mystery in a mine might be a more interesting pastime for a Sunday afternoon than exposing yourself to hours of dangerous UV radiation on the beach... and in terms of dangerous radiation... your laser pointer—”

“Juve! We don’t have an unsolved mystery,” Pete argued, “except perhaps the mystery of how to get out of here!”

“Think of it as an intellectual challenge. It can’t do you any harm. You should be grateful that you get to be part of these investigation excursions, Pete.”

“Grateful?” Pete laughed out. “You can crawl through mines for weeks for all I care, but leave me out of it!”

“No one forced you to come,” Jupiter said, offended.

“Really? You’ve been bugging me for hours!” cried Pete angrily. “And I did you a favour! You know what you could do now? You could realize your mistake and admit that this excursion was a stupid idea... but knowing you, we’ll have to wait a long time for that to happen!”

Jupiter swallowed and Pete already thought he was really going to apologize. Instead, the First Investigator said: “I don’t see how I could have made a mistake. I should perhaps have been more conscientious in checking my sources of information, but otherwise—”

“You know what, Jupe, get lost!” Pete deliberately waved the laser dot across the First Investigator’s face. He knew how childish it was and that he was going too far with it, but he didn’t care.

“That’s dangerous, you idiot!” Jupiter slapped Pete’s hand.

“Stop it, you two!” Bob angrily intervened. “You can fight later if you want. Right now, let’s try to find a way out of here!” He switched on the flashlight on his mobile phone. “All right, now follow me!”

Since the route was marked and paved, they had quickly reached the exit. However, the massive steel door was locked. They shook it, carefully at first, then with all their might. No one responded to their shouting and hammering, and there was no lock that Pete could have tried to pick. The door was padlocked from the outside.

“Darn it!” Pete sighed. “We’ve got to call that Timothy guy to let us out of here. Hopefully he’s still at his ticket booth.”

“Forget it, Pete.” Bob held up his mobile phone. “I had that thought myself. No reception down here.”

Pete gave the First Investigator a withering look. “Now what, master investigator?”

“Let’s look for another exit,” Jupiter said resolutely. “Timothy said something about an old pit cage. Maybe there is a way out from there.”

“And how are we going to find it?”

“By following the visitor route, Pete. If the pit cage wasn’t part of the sightseeing tour, Timothy wouldn’t have told us about it. So let’s go!”

With the markings on the edge of the tunnel, it was actually no problem to move through the mine. Soon daylight was shimmering through the tunnel in front of them!

“There!” Jupiter said, and sure enough, the tunnel led into another cavern with an old, rusty pit cage. A little light fell through the shaft from above.

The pit cage was nothing more than a wire cage without a door and it was in such a bad condition that all three of them were not sure whether it could still function at all. This also applied to the control unit inside the cage.

“Out of service,” Bob said, pointing to a sign dangling from a chain across in front of the pit cage.

The First Investigator unhooked the chain and pressed a few buttons on the control unit. Nothing happened.

“There’s another control device here,” Bob said and picked up a brick-sized gadget from the ground. On it were three buttons—‘Up’, ‘Down’ and ‘Light’. Bob tried them all—without success.

“This thing isn’t plugged in at all,” Jupiter noted, pointing to a few loose cables on the ground. “Wait, I’ll fix something up in a minute!”

Fortunately, the control device could be opened without tools. The cables could be fastened with simple clamps. “There, now it should work! Go ahead into the pit cage!”

“It’ll never work,” Pete growled.

“Pete, your eternal nagging is pointless!” Jupiter said annoyingly.

“Eternal nagging indeed,” Pete grumbled, but then he went into the cage with Bob.

“Let’s go!” Jupiter shouted and pressed the ‘Up’ button. Nothing happened.

“I told you so,” Pete triumphed.

“I must have connected the cables wrongly,” Jupiter said. “No big deal.”

He pressed ‘Down’. The light in the cage came on.

“Aha, so it works... basically, I mean,” Jupe said. “Well, there’s only one option left then!”

He pressed ‘Light’. Squeaking and rumbling, the cage began to move and slowly ascended.

“It’s working!” shouted Bob. “Stop it and come in here with us!”

But the cage would not stop. Jupiter pressed all the buttons, but the ‘Light’ button that had set the cage in motion was stuck. “Damn!”

“Come on, Jupe, come in anyway!” shouted Bob, holding out a hand to him.

Jupiter dropped the control device and jumped. He grabbed Pete’s hand with his right and Bob’s with his left. Together they pulled him up. Not a second too soon, the cage went up into the rocky shaft. However, the sharp-edged rock wall scraped along Jupiter’s lower right leg! His jeans tore with an ugly rip and Jupiter cried out as the rough stone scraped his leg.

“Jupe!” cried Bob, startled.

“No harm done,” Jupiter gasped.

They went up about ten metres. Then the shaft spat them out so abruptly that all three had to squint their eyes at the glare of the sun.

When Pete opened his eyes, he saw that they were on top of a small hill at a level above the old mine buildings. Around them was the desert, with the small town of Elizabeth Lake in the distance.

Pete was still busy adjusting his eyes to the bright light when a man walked up the hill towards them. It was Timothy.

“Are you out of your mind?” he yelled from a distance. He was beside himself with rage. “What are you doing! How did you get the cage going?”

“There were a few cables disconnected and—” Jupe began.

“They were disconnected for a reason! Do you know how dangerous that old thing is? It can get stuck at any time! It doesn’t even have a door!”

“We were locked down there, sir,” Jupiter said as calmly as he could. “There was no other way out except—”

“Locked down there? You’ve got to be kidding!” By now Timothy was in front of them, dragging the three of them out of the pit cage.

“You guys got yourselves locked up in the mine!” he raged on. “Let me guess—you thought you’d find the Croft brothers’ loot! How stupid can you be! Do you seriously think there’s anything left down there? After ninety years? It’s always the same with you brats! I’m getting tired of it! Give me your names and your parents’ phone numbers now! I can’t wait to hear what they have to say!”

2. Back at School

Monday, 15 September

“From the time of the nineteenth-century Spanish settlers, what still exists in California today are primarily the mission stations and some forts that can be found along *El Camino Real*, which is Spanish for ‘The Royal Road’.”

Mr Rochester wrote the name of the commemorative route on the board. That was the moment when Pete mentally said goodbye to the lesson. After all, he had managed to listen for about three minutes.

Now he was inwardly thinking about yesterday—about that hare-brained expedition to the mercury mine, his argument with Jupiter and the trouble he had got into at home.

Timothy had indeed got serious and actually called his parents. There had been a thunderstorm! For half an hour, Pete’s parents had reproached him for his reckless, irresponsible behaviour and threatened drastic punishments—ban on surfing, ban on basketball, and of course, ban on investigation activities.

In the end, it had remained threats. Nevertheless, Pete had another go at the First Investigator on the phone for all the trouble he had to endure just for Jupiter to experience something!

Jupiter—where was he anyway? Pete hadn’t seen him at school all morning. Perhaps the First Investigator had been avoiding Pete because he suspected that their quarrel was not yet over. Anyway, the Second Investigator resolved to look for him at the next break.

Pete’s gaze wandered to the clock above the classroom door. It was only twelve minutes into the lesson. Lost in thought, he began to play with his laser pointer and let the red dot wander across the table top. He had to be careful not to let Mr Rochester see his toy and take it away from him.

“Pete, you seem bored.” Damn! Too late, but Mr Rochester was not after his laser pointer. “How about you give us an example of a Spanish fortification near here?”

“What fortification... uh—”

“Santa Clarita,” Jeffrey, who was sitting next to him, whispered.

“Santa Clarita,” Pete said aloud.

Mr Rochester gave Jeffrey a nasty look. “Thank you, Jeffrey. So, Pete, do you mean the city of Santa Clarita or Santa Clarita Island?”

“The... uh... I mean the—”

Rochester rolled his eyes. “If you had been listening, you would know that I was talking about pirate bases earlier. So that means... what?”

“That means—”

There was a knock on the door. Without waiting for a ‘come in’, Mrs Meyers from the director’s office stuck her head through the door. “Excuse me, Mr Rochester, is Pete Crenshaw with you?”

“He’s stammering his head off right now.”

“The director wants to see him.”

“Oh!” Mr Rochester turned to Pete. “I suppose someone’s got an even bigger problem than Spanish fortifications, huh?”

A few of Pete's classmates giggled.

The Second Investigator could not imagine why the director wanted to see him. He hadn't done anything wrong. Whatever it was about, it saved him from Mr Rochester.

With mock regret, Pete shrugged his shoulders and walked past his teacher out of the classroom. To his surprise, it was not only Mrs Meyers who was waiting for him in the corridor.

"Bob! What are you doing here? Do you have to see the director too?"

Bob nodded. "Do you know what it's about?"

"You'll find out in a minute," Mrs Meyers said impatiently and marched ahead. She led them into the director's office. Behind his large desk sat Mr Amos, looking anxiously at them. He was not alone.

"Mrs Jones!" Pete exclaimed. "What are you doing here?"

Mathilda Jones, Jupiter's aunt, jumped up from her chair. She was pale and had a feverish expression in her eyes that frightened Pete.

"Where is he?" she asked, not bothering with a greeting. Her gaze wandered unsteadily from one to the other. "You know, don't you?"

Pete blinked. "What do we know?"

"Where Jupe is! You must know!"

"Well, in his class, I suppose," Pete said uncertainly. "I don't know what he has right now. Chemistry?"

"English," said Mr Amos. "Your friend Jupiter has English with Mrs Wilson, but he didn't show up for class."

"He wasn't at breakfast this morning as well," Mrs Jones added. "I went to his room, but he wasn't there. His bed was made, which meant he didn't sleep in it at all! He also wasn't anywhere in the salvage yard."

"Have you tried to reach him on his mobile phone?" Pete asked.

"Of course we have!" Aunt Mathilda snapped. "We have been trying for hours. There was no answer and it just goes to voicemail."

Pete had never seen Jupiter's aunt like that. She could be quick-tempered, yes, but desperate? Seeking help, he turned to Bob, who just shrugged his shoulders.

"Where is he?" asked Aunt Mathilda.

"I don't know," Pete replied.

"I don't believe it!" Mathilda Jones hit the table top with the flat of her hand, causing Director Amos to wince. She put her hands on her hips and stood up in front of Pete. She was a head shorter than him, yet Pete involuntarily backed away a little. "Of course you know where he is!"

"W-what? Why, no!"

With a jerk, she turned to Bob, with whom she was eye-to-eye. "Out with it! You were together yesterday! I bet you were up to some mischief. You're in trouble again, as usual! Where were you three last night?"

"At home!" Bob exclaimed. "Pete and I, at least. I don't know what Jupe has been up to."

"Really, Mrs Jones," Pete said, "we don't know anything. We didn't even know Jupe had been missing until now!"

Aunt Mathilda burst into tears. With trembling fingers, she pulled out a handkerchief and blew her nose loudly.

Mr Amos was so overwhelmed with Mrs Jones crying in his office that he asked Bob and Pete to accompany her home. He gave them both leave for the rest of the day. As he said

goodbye, he expressed confidence that Jupiter would turn up soon. “After all, he is the best student in his class. Oh, what am I saying—in his cohort!”

What this had to do with Jupe’s disappearance was beyond Pete and Bob, but they simply nodded and accompanied Aunt Mathilda out.

Outside, the sun shone from the blue sky onto the endless rows of bicycles in front of the school building.

“Now please tell us all over again,” Bob requested. “When did Jupe go missing?”

“Since last night... or this morning. I don’t know!” Mathilda Jones was upset. Her tears were fortunately half-dried. “It started when that gentleman from the mine called and complained bitterly about you three. What happened there again?”

“Nothing at all,” Bob affirmed.

“Nothing at all? Stop taking me for a fool, Bob Andrews! When Jupe came home, his leg was bleeding! I had to clean and bandage it!”

“It was from a... uh... mishap at the mine,” Pete tried to explain the situation. “—But it doesn’t explain why Jupe should have disappeared. We don’t have a case in progress at the moment and—”

“Aha!” Mathilda Jones interrupted the Second Investigator and poked him in the chest with her index finger. “So it has something to do with your investigation games again!”

“No!” Pete defended himself. “I just told you that at the moment we don’t have a case—”

“It’s always the same!” insisted Aunt Mathilda. “Your snooping has already got you into trouble more than once! Oh, what am I talking about! Dozens of times! Dozens of times that I know of!” Jupiter’s aunt actually didn’t know many things... and it was better that way.

“What happened after Jupe came back?” asked Pete quickly.

“We had a huge argument...” She swallowed hard. “Then he took off to your hideout without having dinner with us.”

The ‘hideout’ as Aunt Mathilda called it, was the headquarters of The Three Investigators, which they had set up in an old mobile home trailer in The Jones Salvage Yard. Jupiter, just like Pete and Bob, was actually there all the time when there wasn’t something else to do.

“I didn’t see him after that. I thought he just went to bed after us, but he apparently didn’t go to bed at all!”

“It can’t have anything to do with our investigation work,” Bob said. “The mine thing was just a trip that got a bit out of hand. Jupe did want to find our next case there—but he didn’t.”

“Are you really telling the truth, Bob Andrews?” She looked into his eyes in a scrutinizing manner.

Bob nodded.

“Pete Crenshaw?”

“We don’t know anything, Mrs Jones. We really don’t.”

“But where is he then? Where is Jupe?”

Half an hour later, they arrived at The Jones Salvage Yard. Mathilda Jones had had her husband take her to the school, but he had immediately returned to attend to business at the salvage yard. Bob and Pete had therefore accompanied Jupiter’s aunt home on foot, pushing their bikes.

Titus Jones, a short, wiry man with a large moustache, immediately rushed out of the yard office as they stepped through the gate. “Well?”

Aunt Mathilda shook her head. “He’s not at school. Bob and Pete don’t know anything either.”

“Really?” asked Titus Jones briskly, raising an eyebrow.

“Yes...” Mathilda sighed.

Uncle Titus slumped his shoulders. “Where can the boy be?”

“Something has happened!” Aunt Mathilda was convinced and her lips quivered slightly. “I have a feeling it has. We’ve been worried sick! If something happened to him now... I would never forgive myself!” Tears came to her eyes again.

“Maybe I try to call him again,” Bob mumbled and pulled his phone out of his pocket. He dialled Jupiter’s number, but after half a minute, the voicemail came on.

“Hi Jupe, this is Bob. Where are you? We’re all worried. Your aunt is—”

“—Very annoyed!” cried Aunt Mathilda. “That’s enough. I’m calling the police!”

“Er... yes. Call us!” Bob hung up.

“Don’t you think that’s a bit hasty, Mathilda?” asked Uncle Titus, putting his hand on her arm.

Bob cleared his throat. “As we know the police, they won’t do anything immediately.”

“The police has to look for him!” said Aunt Mathilda firmly. “Jupe is probably lying unconscious somewhere under a bridge!”

While Bob was still wondering how she came to think of a bridge of all things, Mathilda Jones marched into the yard office and reached for the phone.

“You really don’t know anything?” asked Uncle Titus, this time in a lowered voice. “I would understand if you didn’t want to worry Mathilda, but you can tell me.”

“We really don’t know anything,” Pete confirmed and sighed.

Titus Jones cast a worried glance through the stained window into the yard office where his wife was clutching the telephone handset so tightly that her knuckles were turning white. “Perhaps you two can go check out your trailer. Maybe Jupe left a message or something. I’ll go to the office and see what Mathilda can get from the police.”

Bob and Pete went to a section of the salvage yard where a huge mountain of scrap metal was piled up. They stopped in front of an old discarded refrigerator that stood at the edge of the scrap metal pile. This was a secret entrance they called the Cold Gate. Bob opened the door, crept into the fridge and activated a mechanism that allowed the back wall of the fridge to be pushed aside. Behind it was a short tunnel constructed from corrugated sheet metal. This led to an old mobile home trailer which served as the office of The Three Investigators.

Over time, the trailer was equipped with everything a real office needed—computer, printer, telephone, fax machine, refrigerator, and a crime laboratory. In one corner was a kitchenette, but they never cooked there, at most they just heated something up. Next to the main desk were armchairs and a cosy sofa that the boys had taken from the salvage yard at some point. Along the walls were several shelves full of books, stacks of magazines, and folders containing documents and archives of their previous cases. Pinned on the walls were newspaper clippings reporting cases of The Three Investigators. Between them hung a large map of Los Angeles.

It was never tidy here, but at first glance, almost everything was as usual. However, Pete noticed a red folder on the desk and several similar ones on an armchair. “What’s that all about?” he wondered.

Bob checked the title of the folder that was on the desk. “Just as I suspect—documents of our earlier cases, in fact, from the early years of our investigation business. Why did Jupe dig these out?”

Then he picked up the rest on the armchair. Underneath, he spotted Jupiter's mobile phone. "No wonder he did not answer the calls."

"That's not a good sign, Bob. Jupe would not leave his mobile phone lying around like that."

Fortunately, Bob had watched the First Investigator unlock it often enough. He checked the messages. However, apart from seven missed calls from Aunt Mathilda and his own, nothing had come in. Jupiter had not made any calls himself either.

Frustrated, Bob put the phone back on the desk. He paused to think. "Look, Pete!"

Pete frowned. "What am I supposed to see?"

"Well, there! The two water glasses. Two!"

"The other glass could be used by one of us," Pete remarked.

"Unlikely..." Bob said. "I always use the Magic Mountain glass—never that one... and you drink from the bottle all the time."

"That's true, but then Jupe probably used two."

"He is much too lazy for that," Bob explained. "He usually uses one and the same one for days until it has become so stained that it is disgusting. Then he gives it a quick rinse and keeps using it." He pointed again to the two glasses. "The one on the left is on the verge of being disgusting. The one on the right has only been used maybe once. Jupe had a visitor in here."

"That's unusual," Pete remarked. "I thought we had agreed that outsiders are not allowed in here."

"Perhaps this was an exception," Bob said.

Without touching the glass, Pete sniffed inside it. "A visitor who drank Coke?"

He looked at Bob. At the same time, they said: "Fingerprints!"

Pete went next door to their little crime lab and returned with the fingerprint equipment. Routinely, he secured the prints on the barely used glass and compared them with their own.

"Well, they didn't come from one of us..." Pete concluded, "but then who did they come from?"

Bob didn't know, of course.

The two of them decided to look more closely at the mess in the trailer. Maybe there were more clues here that they just hadn't found yet. Was there tell-tale dirt on the floor? Or was there something stuck in the crevices of the armchair that had slipped out of the unknown visitor's pocket?

"There!" Pete pointed to the centre of a notepad. A word had been scratched onto the paper with a pointed object.

The Second Investigator slapped his hand over his mouth in shock. In spidery letters, it said:

HELP!

3. A Case for the Two Investigators

“For goodness’ sake,” Bob muttered. “Did Jupe carve that here?”

“Who else?”

“Yes, but—”

“Bob! Pete!” It was Aunt Mathilda. “Can you come out here!”

Bob and Pete immediately left the trailer and went back to the salvage yard through the Cold Gate. Jupe’s uncle and aunt were standing there.

“So, did you find anything in the trailer?” asked Uncle Titus.

“We, uh—” Pete began.

“No,” Bob said quickly. “Actually... yes. We found Jupe’s mobile phone. No wonder we can’t reach him. What did the police say?”

“We reported to them but they are not doing anything immediately,” Aunt Mathilda said angrily. “They said that the missing person usually reappears within a short time. What nonsense! As if Jupe was a runaway or hard to raise kid or something!”

“Didn’t you talk to Inspector Cotta?” Pete wanted to know. Inspector Cotta was their contact at the Rocky Beach Police Department. He had helped them many times in their cases, although he wasn’t very enthusiastic about the boys’ role as investigators.

“Ha!” Mathilda Jones burst out. “He was out on an assignment!”

“Mrs Jones, could it be that Jupe had a visitor last night?” asked Bob.

“A visitor? No, not that I know of.” Then she suddenly slapped her hands over her mouth in shock. “You mean he was abducted?”

“Abducted?” Titus Jones looked at his wife sceptically. “What makes you think of that?”

“Do you think he would have left voluntarily?” she snapped at him, but immediately she apologized. “Forgive me, Titus... I knew that one day their investigation games would come to a bad end!”

“Calm down, Mathilda. Nothing has come to a bad end yet. Maybe there’s a completely harmless explanation for all this.”

“You really think so?”

Bob turned his head so that Mathilda Jones could not see the doubt in his face. He was thinking of the cola glass and the message scribed on the notepad. He too, had the nagging feeling that Jupiter had walked into something threatening.

The idea that he and Pete would now have to investigate alone sent him into a mild panic. He didn’t even know where they should start. The First Investigator would have had a million ideas right away, but Bob was at a loss.

Uncle Titus led Aunt Mathilda back into the yard office. Bob signalled to Pete and both of them crept back to Headquarters.

“This is a case for the two investigators,” Bob murmured when he dropped into an armchair.

“How do we proceed?” asked Pete.

Bob shook his head. “If I only knew...”

“Come on, Bob, we’ve been investigators long enough. We just have to be logical about it! ... My goodness, imagine I just said that—”

Fortunately, Bob jumped at it. "You're right. Let's proceed logically. Firstly, does Jupe's disappearance have anything to do with our excursion at the mine?"

"I don't see how."

"What's the deal with these folders scattered all over the place?" Bob wondered.

"I don't know, but it doesn't say anything about the mercury mine," Pete said, "only your reports about our old cases. Jupe picked them out because... because he had a visitor—a cola-drinking visitor, and then he... dropped his phone... before he was... abducted..." Pete was frustrated. "Goodness, Bob, I can't do this! Be logical, I mean. I don't know how to do it."

"We're missing some information," Bob suggested. "We need to find out what Jupe was up to yesterday after we got back from Elizabeth Lake—on the computer, for example."

"—And on the phone!" Pete added.

They set to work. Pete quickly found out that there had been no phone calls made from Headquarters for the last three days. No calls had been received either.

Meanwhile, Bob checked the e-mails. Nothing. Then he had the system display the history of Internet pages accessed most recently. On Sunday morning, it had been pages about the Croft brothers and the mercury mine. After returning from Elizabeth Lake, Jupiter had searched for the address of a motel. Nothing else.

"Seven Pines Motel," Bob muttered. "Jupe looked up this address at 9:40 last night. I wonder if this has something to do with his disappearance."

"You mean he went to a motel? But why? Seven Pines Motel is in Hollywood... I don't know anything about that... do you?"

Bob shook his head. "I wonder if he really went there—not in his uncle's pick-up truck, that's for sure."

"His motorbike!" shouted Pete. "Wait, we'll know in a minute!"

The Second Investigator stormed out of Headquarters, across the salvage yard, and onto the street. Nearby was the footpath to the lookout point on Coldwell Hill. Just ahead was a plot of land, abandoned for years, where the remains of a demolished house stood. The shed behind the pile of rubble, however, was still intact.

Some time ago, Jupiter had bought a second-hand motorbike. After Aunt Mathilda had found out about it, she forbade him to use the vehicle, so he was supposed to get rid of it. However, without her knowing, he had hidden it here in the old shed.

Pete pulled open the door to the shed. The motorbike was not there! Instead, there was a big pile of old clothes in the corner—at least that was what it looked like.

Suddenly the pile moved! Pete took a step back, startled, as an unshaven face, framed by shaggy hair, rose from the pile of clothes and glared at the Second Investigator. "What are you doing here?"

"Rubbish-George!" gasped Pete in relief as he recognized the tramp.

Rubbish-George was unkempt and smelly, had long yellowish-grey hair, a beard and spotted teeth. He was known all over Rocky Beach for rummaging through rubbish bins, always looking for all sorts of things that people threw away that he could use. For some time now, he had been living on a houseboat anchored at a corner of the harbour.

"What are you lying around here for?" Pete asked.

"Little nap..."

"Are you staying in this shack now?" Pete continued. "What about your houseboat?"

Rubbish-George waved it off with a yawn. "Long story..."

However, there was no time for long stories. "Tell me, have you seen Jupiter?"

Rubbish-George slowly straightened up and scratched his head. "Hmm... have I seen Jupiter? Let me think... hmm..."

"Oh, please, not that game again!" complained Pete. "You're not getting any money from me! Jupiter has disappeared, it's an emergency! You have to tell me quick!"

However, Rubbish-George remained calm personified. "Careful, Pete, I tend to forget important information unless..."

The Second Investigator groaned in exasperation, but then pulled a crumpled dollar note from his pocket and handed it to the tramp. "So, have you seen him?"

"Not today, but last night."

"Really? When?"

Rubbish-George glanced at his wrist, which had no watch on it. "Too bad, I just misplaced my Rolex. Well, when might that have been? Let me think..." He fell silent.

Pete gave him another dollar.

"It was no longer quite early, but not quite late either. Your master investigator barged into my new domicile here and scared me to death. Before I could complain, he had already grabbed his old bone-shaker and was out again."

"He took the bike? And said nothing?"

"I don't know if he even noticed me. To say he was in a hurry would be an understatement."

"Was he on the run? Was someone chasing him? Where did he go?"

Rubbish-George blinked slowly and remained silent.

"Don't overdo it, George!" warned Pete, who was beginning to run out of patience.

Rubbish-George nodded in agreement. "All right. I have absolutely no idea, dear Pete, because it didn't interest me in the least. He came in, took his bike and was out again—as exhilarated teenagers do—always too much hustle and bustle, never enough composure."

Pete rolled his eyes impatiently. Rubbish-George was clearly too calm for him right now. "Did you notice anything else?"

"It was relatively cold last night."

"No, I mean... something unusual."

However, Rubbish-George's questioning expression told Pete that he was getting nowhere.

"Forget it!" The Second Investigator left the shed without a word of farewell and ran back to Headquarters.

"The bike is gone!" he reported to Bob excitedly.

"What? Really?"

"Yes, and Rubbish-George saw Jupe ride away." Pete related what he had learned. "Jupe was in a great hurry. I hope he didn't crash!"

"No, otherwise the police or the hospital would have called long ago," Bob countered.

The telephone rang. Bob winced.

"The hospital!" gasped Pete, startled, and immediately switched on the loudspeaker.

Bob picked up the phone. "The Three Investigators. Bob Andrews speaking."

"Cotta here. Hello, Bob."

"Inspector!" sighed Bob with relief. "Has something happened?"

"Apparently so... otherwise Mathilda Jones wouldn't have called the police department and hounded my colleague. I want to know from you what happened!"

"Jupiter has disappeared."

"That was what my distraught colleague told me."

"We were hoping you have some news."

“News? No. After all, I’ve only just found out about it, and I thought it was better to call you first before dealing with Jupiter’s aunt. A vague feeling tells me that you know more.”

“Why does everyone think of that?” Pete spoke up loudly.

Inspector Cotta heard Pete’s remark and cleared his throat. “Experience, Pete Crenshaw... or are you trying to tell me that you don’t have a case in progress that could be connected to Jupiter’s disappearance?”

“We don’t have a case in the works at all,” Bob affirmed, “even though that’s hard to believe.”

“Indeed it is. Suppose I believe you, enlighten me with the facts!”

Bob summarized as best he could what they knew—that they had visited the mine in Elizabeth Lake and got into trouble; that an old case might have played a role because Jupiter had dug up their folders; that Jupiter’s last Internet access had been the Seven Pines Motel in Hollywood; that he had left on a motorbike; and that someone had scratched ‘HELP!’ onto the notepad.

Cotta silently took notes. “This call for help worries me,” he finally confessed. “Do you think it’s from Jupiter? Is it his handwriting?”

“The message is scratched onto the paper, not written. They are all in uppercase letters so we can’t tell if it’s from Jupe. By the way, we’ve kept this information from his aunt and uncle so as not to worry them even more, and that includes his motorbike. If Mrs Jones finds out about it now, she’ll tear his head off!”

“To do that, though, Jupiter would have to show up first,” Cotta replied, “but fine, I’ll keep these little secrets... for the time being. Basically, my colleague is right. In most cases, the missing person reappears on their own within a short time, which is why the police do not take immediate action. Here, however, the case is somewhat different. It’s about Jupiter Jones. He doesn’t just run away from home without saying anything. If he disappears, it must have a serious reason.”

“We think so too.”

“So I will instruct my staff to keep their eyes open. What kind of motorbike is that? Do you have the licence plate number?”

Bob rummaged in a drawer to get the information, which he then gave to the inspector.

“I will see what I can do,” Cotta promised.

“Thank you, Inspector.”

“And you two—take care of yourselves! By that, I mean if you find out something, you let me know instead of doing something on your own, understand?”

“Yes, Inspector Cotta.”

Cotta let Bob’s answer hang in the air for a while before he replied: “It would be nice if it were for real this time.” Then he hung up.

“Cotta’s team is keeping an eye out,” Bob said. “Pete, we should inform our team too, don’t you think?”

“Our team? I didn’t know we had any.”

“Of course we have... thousands! All over California!”

Now Pete understood what Bob was getting at. “You’re talking about the Ghost-to-Ghost Hookup!”

“—And the e-mail version! We’ll start the hookup now, Pete! There is a chance we can get a lead this way!”

4. People Disappear

The Ghost-to-Ghost Hookup had been Jupiter's invention.

It worked like this—each of The Three Investigators called his friends and asked them what they wanted to know. These friends then in turn called other friends and forwarded the request. So the Hookup continued, reaching hundreds or even thousands of children and young people all over California within a short time. Those who had a lead reported back to Headquarters. The process was similar with the e-mail version, but with an advantage that images could be sent along.

Bob and Pete looked for useful photos of Jupiter and his motorbike and passed on the missing person's report to all the friends and acquaintances they could think of. Now it was time to wait. Experience had shown that it took at least half a day before the first responses came in.

Bob and Pete then continued their search for clues. Pete examined the laboratory while Bob looked around the outdoor workshop. Secretly, they both hoped that Jupiter would just walk through the Cold Gate any minute and have a very simple explanation for his disappearance... but that did not happen.

In the meantime, Inspector Cotta had also contacted the Jones couple and tried to calm them down. He had not succeeded.

From the outdoor workshop, Bob peeked out to the salvage yard and watched anxiously as Titus and Mathilda Jones roamed aimlessly around the square.

Robotically, Aunt Mathilda led an old gentleman interested in damask tablecloths to the floor lamps. She then hissed at a somewhat snooty lady who had enquired about gold-coloured picture frames, asking why she didn't just take a silver one. She was so erratic that a young ponytailed customer wearing a baseball cap finally asked if everything was all right. Aunt Mathilda then burst into tears amidst the collection of coffee pots and told the customer the whole drama about her investigator-playing nephew, who had probably been abducted by the Mafia or worse.

After Aunt Mathilda had calmed down a bit and the customer had left, there was no one else on the premises. Uncle Titus took the opportunity to close the main gate. "We'll call it a day."

"But it's still early in the day!" Aunt Mathilda protested half-heartedly.

"It's no use, Mathilda," Uncle Titus said, "and a few hours without sales won't make us poor." Exhausted, he put his arm around his wife's shoulders and together they went back into the yard office. The sight stung Bob.

Something rattled at his feet. The grate blocking the outside access to Tunnel Two, one of their secret entrances to Headquarters, fell clattering to the ground. Pete came crawling out of the large corrugated metal pipe.

"I didn't find anything suspicious in the lab," he reported, getting to his feet, "and not in Tunnel Two either. What about you?"

Bob shook his head.

"Bob," Pete said quietly, looking anxiously at his friend. "I'm reproaching myself... because of yesterday... because we had such a fight. Maybe that's why he left."

“That’s nonsense, Pete. Jupe won’t just run away.”

“Then where is he? What do we do if he doesn’t come back? What if Jupe is gone... forever?”

They had not allowed this thought until now. However, in the sudden calm of the salvage yard, it ambushed them like a predator that had been patiently lying in wait for the last few hours.

“Nonsense,” Bob repeated. “He’s coming back. We’ll find him. We just have to!”

“But we don’t have a lead!”

“Yes, we do. The Seven Pines Motel in Hollywood. Jupe searched for the address on the Internet last night. He must have had some reason to do so. If we go there, we might find out more.”

Half an hour later, they reached the Seven Pines Motel. It was located in the foothills of the Santa Monica Mountains in Hollywood.

For a motel, it made an astonishingly noble impression. The front rooms even had a view over the wide plain of Los Angeles to the sea. In the distance, the skyscrapers of the city centre rose out of the haze.

As Pete parked his MG near the driveway, he suddenly saw a familiar silhouette in the rearview mirror—a chubby boy with dark, wavy hair was crossing the road. Pete jerkily turned his head... but it was not Jupiter. “I’m already hallucinating,” he murmured.

“That’s how I feel as well,” Bob confessed. “I thought I’d spotted him somewhere five times on the way here.”

They walked towards the motel and entered the building. A young woman with black hair was vacuuming the small reception room. She had just switched off the vacuum cleaner and began cleaning the leather upholstery of a small seating area. At the reception desk stood an elderly gentleman with neatly coiffed silver-grey hair and gold-rimmed glasses. A small name tag on his lapel said ‘Anderson’.

“Good afternoon, gentlemen,” the receptionist asked. “What can I do for you?”

“Good afternoon,” said Bob. “We have a question that may sound a little strange. We are looking for our friend Jupiter Jones. We have no idea where he is, but there are certain indications that he may be or have been here.”

Bob was about to show Mr Anderson a photo of Jupiter, but the receptionist said: “A boy your age? Medium height, dark hair and of... somewhat plump build?”

Pete gasped. “Yes, that’s the one! You saw him? When? Where? Where is he?”

Mr Anderson winced, then raised his hands apologetically. “Oh, no, it’s a misunderstanding. I’m extremely sorry, but I have not seen your friend.”

“But you just said—”

“The Rocky Beach police were here earlier and asked about your friend and showed me a photo,” Mr Anderson explained, “but I’m afraid I had to tell the inspector the same thing I told you. As far as I know, the boy did not show up here. I’m sorry.”

“Well,” Bob muttered. “He did look up the address of this motel on the Internet, and we were hoping that—” Bob was lost for words. Instead, he took out their business card.

“Mr Anderson,” he said. “We are junior investigators and we work closely with the Rocky Beach police. Here is our card...” He handed the card to Mr Anderson. It said:



“Our friend, Jupiter Jones,” Bob continued, “who is one of our team members as shown on this card, has gone missing. If you have any information, could you give us a call urgently?”

“I’m really sorry, but at the moment, I can’t give you more information than I already have,” Mr Anderson affirmed one more time. “If I can help you in any other way—”

Pete shook his head. “We don’t know how. He disappeared without a trace.”

“People disappear...” said the young woman who was cleaning the furniture. She had a Spanish accent. Apparently she had been following the conversation attentively.

“Excuse me, Maria?” asked Mr Anderson.

“People disappear,” Maria repeated, putting her cleaning cloth aside. “Someone else was also here this morning asking about a person.”

“Is that so?” the receptionist asked.

“Yes... before your shift, Mr Anderson. Around ten.”

“Who was here?” Bob wanted to know. “Can you describe the person?”

“Young woman... tall... looked like a tennis player... wearing baseball cap of the Tigers. Team not as good as it used to be, so says my husband. I’m not interested in sports anyway.”

“The Tigers?” shouted Bob.

Pete nudged him and murmured: “Uh... it’s not important which baseball team—”

“Pete! Earlier there was a tall, athletic woman with a ponytail and a Tigers cap at the salvage yard! Aunt Mathilda spoke and even cried in front of her!”

“What, really? You mean it was the same woman?”

“Just a minute!” Bob excused himself from Maria and Mr Anderson and pulled Pete outside. There, he took out his mobile phone and called the Jones house.

“Bob!” Aunt Mathilda spoke up breathlessly. “Have you found him?”

“No, Mrs Jones, I’m afraid not, but I... I just have one question. Do you remember the woman who was at the salvage yard this afternoon? The one you... uh... cried to and told her about Jupe?”

“Yes, of course. I guess she noticed that something was wrong and spoke to me. At that moment, I just couldn’t help it... I burst into tears. That was so unpleasant! The poor thing probably didn’t know what was happening, but she was very nice. At that moment, I was very grateful to her.”

“Did she say anything? Or asked?”

“I don’t really remember, Bob. I was so out of it. I think she was just listening to me.”

“And what did you tell her?”

“Well, everything that happened!” Aunt Mathilda was getting impatient. “Why are you asking me all this? That woman can hardly have anything to do with Jupe’s disappearance! After all, she was here quite by chance.”

“Yes,” Bob said quickly. “Yes, of course. It... it just came to me. I have to hang up now, Mrs Jones. See you later!” He turned to Pete. “It sounds to me like the woman in the Tigers

cap was fishing information from Aunt Mathilda!”

Pete nodded thoughtfully. “Then she has something to do with the case.”

They returned to the foyer and approached Maria. “Excuse me,” Bob said. “We had to clear something up quickly. Tell me, Maria, do you know anything more about the woman who was here this morning? What kind of car she came in, for example?”

Maria shook her head slowly. “Did not see car.”

“Was she perhaps with someone else?”

“No.”

“Or... anything else?”

Again, just a shake of her head.

“What exactly did she ask?” Bob wanted to know. “Did she say the name of our friend Jupiter Jones or did she just describe him?”

Maria looked from one to the other in confusion.

“Please, Maria,” Mr Anderson said. “This seems to be a serious matter. If you can help the young gentlemen—”

“Actually the woman didn’t ask about your friend. I didn’t say that either. She asked for a man.”

Pete frowned. “A man? What man?”

“A guest. He used to live here... many years ago. Robert was on duty, Mr Anderson. I saw him check the computer. The woman wanted to know where the man went after that, but Robert didn’t know. It was too long ago. The woman said that the man disappeared—just like your friend.”

“What was the name of this guest?” asked Bob, irritated.

“Had funny name. I can’t remember. Robert wrote it down.”

Mr Anderson was leafing through some papers behind the counter. “I saw the note earlier. I was wondering what it was for. Wait a minute... ah, here it is!”

Then Mr Anderson said something that shattered everything Bob and Pete had known so far about Jupiter’s disappearance.

“The man the lady was asking about was called Mr Rhandur—Rama Sidri Rhandur.”

5. Bob's Records

"Rama Sidri Rhandur..." Bob murmured in deep thought when they were back at Headquarters half an hour later.

They had hurriedly left the Seven Pines Motel and driven back to Rocky Beach. They had, however, requested Mr Anderson and Maria to get in touch should the woman in the Tigers cap turn up again... or should anything arise in connection with Jupiter... or with Mr Rhandur.

"Rama Sidri Rhandur..." Bob repeated and leafed through the red folder Jupiter had left on the desk. The folder contained the documents and report that Bob himself wrote for 'The Mystery of the Fiery Eye' some years ago when they first encountered Mr Rhandur.

Bob read out the important facts for Pete: "In that case, we helped the young Englishman August August, called Gus, settle his inheritance matter. His great-uncle Horatio August had left him a valuable ruby from India—the so-called Fiery Eye..."

"I know all that, Bob," Pete said. "I was also involved back then!"

"Let me read out the summary of the case anyway. After all, what am I writing these reports for?" Bob insisted and proceeded to read:

The Fiery Eye is a ruby as big as a pigeon's egg, shaped like an eye, and has an intense crimson colour. The gemstone is said to have magical powers. Among other things, it had brought ill fortune to almost all previous owners. One legend says that when the ruby is kept unseen and untouched for fifty years, it will be purified and no longer bring ill fortune, providing it is bought, found or given, not seized or stolen.

To satisfy the fifty-year condition, Horatio had the ruby buried and left his grand-nephew only a coded clue as to where it was, and when it should be retrieved after the purification duration had passed.

However, someone else wanted the ruby—Rama Sidri Rhandur, a sinister man from India. He had three dots tattooed on his forehead, which was why we called him 'Three-Dots'. He came from the mountain village of Pleshiwar in northern India and was a member of the Temple of Justice, from which the Fiery Eye originally came. The followers of this temple are understood to be warlike mountain people.

Throughout the investigation, Three-Dots was hot on our heels. In the end, we succeeded in finding the stone, not him. He didn't dare seize it from us because he feared bringing back the curse. So Mr Rhandur offered the rightful owner, namely Gus, a large sum of money for the Fiery Eye. Gus accepted the offer, Rhandur took the stone and left.

"... End of story," Bob concluded.

Pete nodded. "Nothing new there, but what is going on? What does this past case have to do with Juve's disappearance!"

Bob tapped on the last page of the case report. "Look at these little holes here. These are staple holes. There was something stapled here, and I remember what it was—the business card Mr Rhandur had given us back then to contact him should we find the Fiery Eye. He was staying in a motel in Hollywood at that time."

"At the Seven Pines Motel!"

“Exactly!” Bob affirmed. “I assume that Jupe also remembered it. That’s why he looked for this folder and tore out the card. After that, he searched for the motel on the Internet either for more information or for directions to get there.”

“But why?” asked Pete. “Why did he suddenly want to go to the motel where Rhandur stayed at that time, especially after we had just wandered through a mercury mine? What is the connection? The Fiery Eye case has been closed for years!”

Bob shook his head thoughtfully. “I don’t think it has anything to do with the mine.” He pointed to the cola glass. “Jupiter had a visitor. That visit must have revived the old case.”

“Perhaps a visit from Tiger Girl? I mean, the woman in the Tigers cap.” Pete wondered.

Bob shrugged his shoulders. “Possible... quite possible... In fact, she might have been here and asked Jupe about Rhandur. Jupe then dug out this folder and found the address of the Seven Pines Motel. Then Tiger Girl went there this morning and asked about Rhandur. If it was so, Tiger Girl is playing a double game, otherwise she wouldn’t have approached Aunt Mathilda... Hmm... no, the more I think about it, the less likely it sounds. It must have been somehow different.”

“Somehow different...” Pete repeated in frustration. “Great. So what do we do now?”

“We should also look for Three-Dots. In the process, we might find Tiger Girl, or even Jupe himself! It’s the only lead we can follow at the moment.”

They immediately set to work. Pete’s contribution consisted mainly of looking over Bob’s shoulder as he did his Internet search. After only five minutes, Bob gave up in disappointment.

“I can’t find any Rama Sidri Rhandur.”

“What about Pleshiwar—the place where Rhandur is from? Do a search for it.”

“Pete, if I can’t find a Rama Sidri Rhandur in general, I won’t be able to find one in Pleshiwar!” Bob was irritated. He still entered ‘Pleshiwar’ as a search term, but as expected, that got him nowhere.

Instead, he came across a news report that was a few weeks old. It said:

Severe Earthquake Uncovers Secret Chamber in Northern India

At 6:40 am local time, a major earthquake occurred in northern India. At least four people were killed in the village of Pleshiwar.

One resident said: “Our house started shaking, we immediately ran out to safety. It was the most violent earthquake I have ever experienced.”

There was also heavy damage to the city’s most famous building—the old summer palace of Maharaja Rajendra Sinha. There, an entire wing collapsed, and exposed an underground chamber that no one had known existed. However, it is still too dangerous to examine the place as aftershocks are expected in the next few days.

“Do you think this has anything to do with Jupe?” Pete asked.

“It’s hard to say, but if we continue to deal with Pleshiwar, we risk following the wrong trail. We should concentrate on Three-Dots. The problem is how? That time, he appeared out of nowhere and disappeared into nowhere again. No one but us had anything to do with him.”

“That’s not exactly correct, Bob.” Pete had an idea. “Gus! We can call him! Maybe he knows something! After all, he sold Rhandur the Fiery Eye back then.”

“Good idea, Pete!”

They had not seen Gus since then, but were still in contact occasionally. In the previous case, Gus had received a handsome sum of money through the sale of the ruby and had given The Three Investigators a generous gift for their help. He also had made certain financial

arrangements with the Rent-'n-Ride Auto Agency such that whenever The Three Investigators needed transportation, they could call the company to hire a luxurious Rolls-Royce and the driving services of Worthington the chauffeur. This transportation arrangement had been crucial to The Three Investigators in their early years of investigation when they had not acquired their driver's licences.

It went without saying that The Three Investigators wrote Gus a nice card or wished him a happy birthday. However, they had not heard from him in the last few months.

Bob looked at his watch. "It's already quite late in England, but we can't take that into account now." He looked up Gus's home number and reached for the phone while Pete switched on the loudspeaker.

"Yes?" Gus's father answered the call.

"Good evening, Mr August. This is Bob Andrews from California. I'm sorry to disturb you so late. Is Gus there by any chance?"

"Oh, hello Bob! You want to speak to Gus? But he should be with you!"

"Excuse me?"

"Oh, damn. Now I've spoiled the surprise. How stupid of me!"

"I... I don't understand, Mr August."

Gus's father sighed. "Well, it's too late now anyway, so I might as well tell you. Gus flew to California two days ago. He wanted to visit you, but it was supposed to be a surprise. Now I've spoiled it."

Bob was still irritated, but tried not to let on. "This is really a surprise! He's been here for two days, you say?"

"He landed yesterday morning your time. However, he had an appointment near Los Angeles and didn't know exactly when he would drop by Rocky Beach. He hasn't contacted me since he landed either! Typical... The boy doesn't think it's necessary to call me regularly anymore. Anyway, he doesn't live with me, but in his own little apartment."

"Well, I'm sure he'll show up here soon," Bob said, trying hard not to let Mr August sense how alarmed he was right now. Another worried parent was the last thing they needed. "Tell me, Mr August, what was his appointment for?"

"Oh, that's an interesting matter, and it even has something to do with you indirectly... or rather with my late Uncle Horatio. You remember?"

"Yes, I do."

"Two weeks ago, I got a call from America. It was an old friend of my uncle. I didn't know him as I hardly knew anything about Horatio. He told me that they had travelled around the world together and had many adventures. Now, he wanted to talk to me about those old stories... especially about the Fiery Eye and the Temple of Justice..."

6. An Old Acquaintance

Bob almost gasped. He only managed to hide his excitement with difficulty. “Really?” he asked as casually as possible. “About what exactly?”

“He didn’t tell me that, because I explained to him straight away that I didn’t know much about it. I gave him Gus’s number as he was the one who found the Fiery Eye together with you. Gus only told me later that this man had called him and invited him to California. He was very pleased, because he had been planning to visit you again for a long time anyway. The call from my uncle’s old friend was a welcome opportunity to finally put the plan into action.”

“What was this friend’s name?”

“His name is White. He didn’t give me his first name, I recall.”

“Do you happen to have his phone number?”

“Sorry, no, but don’t worry, sooner or later Gus will get in touch with you. He’ll probably be at your place tomorrow. Please don’t tell him that I blurted out the surprise as he’d never forgive me! But you can tell him that his old father would be very happy to get a call. He hates it when I call him as he always feels so controlled.”

“We will, Mr August, I promise!” said Bob. “Thank you very much! And have a good evening!”

“You too!”

Bob hung up the phone. His expression became serious.

“Gus hasn’t been in touch since yesterday morning—neither with us nor with his father. He doesn’t like his father calling him, but we’re going to do it right now!”

“I’m on it,” Pete replied. He checked for Gus’s mobile phone number and dialled it. However, he was immediately informed that the subscriber was not available. There was no voicemail. “He switched off his phone,” Pete said in frustration.

Bob’s gaze darkened. “Something’s wrong, Pete.”

“I also have a bad feeling. He could have disappeared for the same reason as Jupe.”

“In any case, it all has something to do with the Fiery Eye, that’s for sure,” Bob surmised. “We’ve got to find this White guy! Maybe he’s behind the whole thing... and even if he’s not, he’s bound to know something. The fact that he had contacted the August family now of all times can’t be a coincidence!”

“Certainly not. How are we supposed to find Mr White if we don’t even know his first name?”

“Good question, Pete, but we have other leads—The Seven Pines Motel, Tiger Girl, Gus, Mr White, in fact, we’ve got plenty of leads by now! Jupe would be proud of us... but they all come to nothing.” Bob sat back thoughtfully and checked through the folder on his lap again. In it he came across a name they had not brought out yet.

“Do you remember Mr Dwiggins?”

“Why, yes. That was Horatio August’s lawyer who handled the inheritance matter. He gave Gus the coded message from his great-uncle at the time. He also had a visit from Mr Rhandur!”

Bob nodded. "If anyone is interested in Mr Rhandur and the Fiery Eye, sooner or later they may also seek out Mr Dwiggins, don't you think? And that's why we should do it as well! Maybe he knows something. Maybe he had a visit from Jupe!"

"—Or from Tiger Girl."

"—Or from Mr White."

"Then let's not waste time!"

When they stepped outside, it was late afternoon. Therefore, on their second trip to Hollywood that day, they got caught in the middle of rush hour traffic and stood in a traffic jam for a full hour.

Annoyed, Pete steered his MG through the congested streets. The setting sun was already casting shadows on the famous Hollywood sign on the southern slope of Mount Lee when they finally reached Mr Dwiggins's old house in a posh residential area. The city was slowly turning into a sea of lights, already glowing brighter than the fading red in the sky.

Above the doorbell on the front door, there was a small card that said:

H. Dwiggins

Attorney-at-Law

Ring and Walk In.

Pete rang the bell and opened the door.

They were immediately in the living room that served as Mr Dwiggins's office. In front of a wall of shelves full of files and reference books stood an old-fashioned desk lit by a brass lamp with a green glass shade. The rest of the room was dark. That was why Bob and Pete didn't see anyone at first.

Only when they heard a soft whimper did they turn their heads. Crouched in a corner of the office, Mr Dwiggins looked at them with eyes widened in fear. His tie hung half undone around his neck and his gold-rimmed glasses dangled from his ear.

"Mr Dwiggins!" shouted Bob.

The lawyer shakily stretched out a hand and pointed to something behind the two investigators.

Pete turned around just in time to see a shadow rushing towards him! Instinctively, he dodged. The punch that had been intended for his chin only caught him in the shoulder.

Bob was less fortunate. A second intruder ran at him from the same dark corner. With one well-aimed blow, he knocked Bob down. Instinctively, Bob reached for the man and got hold of something, but then, he saw stars before his eyes and went down.

The next moment, the two strangers fled outside to the road.

"Bob!" shouted Pete, but his friend raised his hand defensively.

"Go on," Bob groaned. "Go after them!"

The Second Investigator hesitated only for a second before going after the men. He saw that one of them was clutching a document as both of them ran up the hillside road. The two were in good shape—but so was Pete. Slowly he closed the gap.

Then the men shouted something to each other in a foreign language. Suddenly they separated! One kept running straight ahead. The other jumped over a flat hedge to the right onto a neighbouring property.

Pete followed the second man. He chased him across the garden towards a wooden gate. The fugitive pushed the gate open, ran through and slammed it shut just before Pete reached it.

The Second Investigator reached between the wooden slats and got hold of the fugitive's shirt collar. The man turned around and Pete looked into dark brown, shimmering eyes in a dark-skinned, young face, with black hair falling in thick strands deep into his forehead.

Pete pulled tightly on the man's collar, but that was a mistake. Suddenly the fugitive grabbed Pete's wrist and pulled with all his might. Pete's arms buckled and he banged his face against the gate. It was like a punch. Pete went to his knees. He took a few deep breaths, shooing away his daze. When he saw clearly again, the man had disappeared.

"He can't be far," Pete muttered, getting to his feet. "Back to the road!"

He ran to the hedge, but took cover there. He wanted the two strangers to think he was lying unconscious by the gate.

Along the hedge, he crept further along the road, peering into every garden and driveway, but the two were nowhere to be seen. Suddenly, he heard soft voices. Cautiously, Pete peered over the hedge.

There they were! The two young men were standing in the shade of a pine tree. They were barely visible in the dim evening light. Apparently they were on the lookout for him. Then, suddenly, they hurried down the road towards Dwiggin's house. As they did so, they passed close to Pete. The Second Investigator ducked behind the hedge. When he raised his head again, he saw the two young men get into an old, dented Jeep. Two seconds later, they drove off.

"Darn!" Pete cursed, but he had to wait until the Jeep had passed him. Then he jumped back onto the road and ran to his MG to give chase.

7. The Gaze of the Blue Deity

Bob was on the floor for a few seconds breathing heavily and rubbing his aching chin. After a few moments, it got better but it was long too late for a pursuit.

Mr Dwiggins remained sitting in his corner. With trembling fingers, he put his glasses back on and looked at Bob in confusion. "I know you! Why yes! You're one of those three boys who were... one of those investigators back then!"

"Bob Andrews of The Three Investigators," Bob said. He braced himself and held out his hand to Mr Dwiggins. "Can you stand up?"

Mr Dwiggins let Bob help him up and walked somewhat shakily to his desk, where he dropped into the chair. He reached for a glass of water on the table and drank it all up.

"What happened, Mr Dwiggins?"

Dwiggins's gaze flickered. "I... I had just finished work and went upstairs to my room, but I had forgotten something in the office. So I came back down... and there were suddenly these two guys."

"Two," Bob said gloomily, "and Pete went after them all by himself. I'm sorry, Mr Dwiggins, but I have to go and check on my friend. I'll be right back!"

Bob left the house. He looked around and then he saw the Second Investigator jump into his MG a little way away and start the car.

"Pete!" shouted Bob, but by then the car was already shooting away.

Bob took out his mobile phone and dialled the number of the Second Investigator. "Pete, what's going on? Where are you going?"

"I'm chasing those two guys! I've got to make sure I catch up with them because they've already got quite a head start. I'll be in touch!"

"Okay," Bob said, but Pete had already hung up. Concerned, Bob looked in the direction where the red tail lights of the MG had disappeared.

"Pete is chasing the two men," he reported to Mr Dwiggins shortly afterwards. "Do you know what they wanted?"

The lawyer shook his head silently.

"I only saw them briefly, but I noticed the dark skin and the facial features," Bob said. "If I'm not mistaken, they both came from—"

"India!" exclaimed Mr Dwiggins. "Yes, that's what I immediately thought too!"

"What happened exactly? You came down here to the office and—"

"I switched on the desk lamp here and there they were, standing in front of me! I hadn't noticed them in the dark."

"They must have come through the window," Bob said as he noticed that the office window had been pushed up. He went over and closed it.

"One of them had a document in his hand," Mr Dwiggins continued, "and that's when the other one pushed me into the corner. He guarded me while his accomplice rifled through my files. They were talking to each other, but I didn't understand them. It was probably Hindi, or some other Indian language."

"What were they looking for?" asked Bob.

"I don't know that... but I have an idea." He bent down to some files lying on the floor, gathered them up, and sorted them back onto the shelf. A gap remained. "I knew it! One file is missing! And it's Horatio August's!"

Suddenly the lawyer became very indignant. "Tell me, what's going on here? It's no coincidence that you're here now, is it?"

"Do you remember Jupiter Jones? Our First Investigator? He's disappeared." Bob gave a brief account of how they had come to pay Mr Dwiggins a visit.

"Oh," Dwiggins said as his anger dissipated. "Well, in that case, of course I want to help you find your friend."

"So Jupiter wasn't here? Or did he call you?"

The lawyer shook his head and poured himself another glass of water.

"Or a young woman perhaps, who asked about Mr Rhandur?"

"No, neither... but someone else asked for Mr Rhandur—a gentleman named White was here."

"White? Really? What did he want from you?"

Dwiggins took a sip and began to talk. Mr White had called him and introduced himself in the same way as he did to Gus's father—as an old friend of Horatio.

"That was a fortnight ago," the lawyer continued. "He asked for a meeting, so I invited him to my place here. He came over the same day. A distinguished gentleman about my age... very educated. He told me that in the course of his work in a historical institute, he had come across a mystery that reminded him of his old friend Horatio August. It was about Indian art treasures, and he remembered that Horatio had owned some of these treasures during his lifetime."

"Let me guess," Bob said. "It was about the Fiery Eye."

Mr Dwiggins nodded. "—And the Silver Hand."

"Silver Hand?"

"Yes. White asked if I had ever heard of it. I knew about the Fiery Eye, of course... and then I recalled having heard of the Silver Hand as well."

"Really?" wondered Bob. "I've not come across this hand before."

"It was back then when that unpleasant Mr Rhandur, who wanted the Fiery Eye so badly, had also asked me about the Hand!"

"Did he?"

Dwiggins nodded. "I had never heard of it then, so I could not help Rhandur. I would have forgotten about it completely if Mr White hadn't brought it up. So I told him about the Fiery Eye and Horatio's bequest... and that his great-nephew, young August August, had sold the Fiery Eye to Rhandur. White then wanted to get in touch with the August family. I still have their contact so I gave him that."

Bob nodded. So far, the story matched that of Gus's father. "Did Mr White say why he wanted to know all this?"

"He only hinted," Mr Dwiggins said, "that he was on the trail of a fascinating archaeological mystery... and Horatio had had something to do with it. Since I couldn't help him, he didn't give much away either."

"On the trail of a fascinating mystery..." Bob repeated thoughtfully. "I wouldn't be surprised if Jupiter has stumbled onto the same mystery and got caught up in something. We need to talk to this Mr White! Maybe he knows where Jupiter is!"

The lawyer shook his head regretfully. "He didn't give me his number or his address."

"Did he mention what kind of institute he works at?" Bob asked.

"I'm afraid not."

“—Or tell you what he plans to do next to solve his ‘fascinating mystery’?”

“He was enquiring about old friends or acquaintances of Horatio’s that he might be able to question.”

“As I recall, Horatio August lived a very secluded life, right?” asked Bob.

“That’s right. I can still remember his funeral well. Of the few guests, I only knew the Jackson couple who kept house for him. However, they have both passed away by now. Then there was this gentleman and the old lady. I didn’t know who they were, but I recognized them from an old photograph.”

“What kind of photo? I thought there were no photos of Horatio because he never had one taken.”

“That’s right. Horatio felt persecuted all the time, so he resisted photos... but this particular photo is from a fancy dress party. He was dressed up then and maybe that’s why he made an exception. Wait, it’s in his file.”

“You mean the file that was just stolen?”

“Oh, goodness,” Mr Dwiggins grumbled. “Then of course I can’t show it to you. Horatio was dressed up in it like he was in his twenties. He wore a hat and had glued on a moustache. The man and woman at his side had dressed to match. They were clearly the two who had also come to his funeral. The man looked a bit like that actor Solomon Charles.”

“And the woman?”

“Well... she was just an old lady.”

“Did Mr White know who they were?”

“It seemed that way, but he didn’t tell me.” Mr Dwiggins sighed and shrugged. “I’m afraid that’s all I can tell you.”

“All right,” Bob muttered and made a few notes. He hadn’t found out very much.

At that moment, his mobile phone rang. Bob answered it.

“Hey, Bob, it’s me,” murmured the Second Investigator.

“Pete! Where are you?”

“Somewhere north of Hollywood. The guys drove out of town and then up into the mountains. Now they’ve just turned into a dirt road. I can’t follow in the car as they would know right away. I’m going on foot.”

“Are you sure? That sounds dangerous. There are two of them!”

“I’ll be careful,” Pete said. “I’m also turning off my the phone in case it rings or buzz at the wrong moment.”

“Wait! First tell me exactly where you are!”

Pete gave his location. “Now I have to hurry or I’ll lose them! See you later!”

Worried, Bob put the mobile phone back in his pocket. He didn’t feel good about Pete being out there alone, but there was nothing he could do about it at the moment. Absently, he looked at the ground. Then his eyes fell on something lying behind a bamboo vase. It was a necklace of smoothly polished wooden beads with a pendant.

Bob picked it up and showed it to the lawyer. “Is this yours, Mr Dwiggins?”

“Huh? No. I’ve never seen that before. The burglars must have dropped it!”

Then Bob remembered after getting punched, he grabbed hold of something. “I think I snatched this chain off one of them,” he muttered, holding it up to the glow of the desk lamp. “It’s a prayer chain!”

Mr Dwiggins nodded. “They call it a *mala*. It is common in several religions. In Hinduism, the individual wooden beads symbolize different deities.”

Bob took the pendant in his hand. On it was a human-like being sitting in a praying posture with his legs crossed. The skin was blue and a multitude of arms protruded from the

body. At the forehead, like a third eye, was a tiny shard of red glass.

“This has to be the deity at the Temple of Justice—where the Fiery Eye came from!” Bob said in surprise. He remembered from the previous case that the Fiery Eye was originally mounted on the forehead of the temple deity. “So those two Indians came from Pleshiwar! The members of the temple are said to be fierce and warlike... and Pete is hot on their heels—all alone!”

Pete crept along the dark dirt road, trying to make as little noise as possible. The path was stony and uneven and by now, it was almost pitch dark. The city was too far away to light up the sky. Fortunately, there were only bushes around him, no trees, so at least the narrow crescent moon provided a little light.

The Second Investigator had not gone far when he spotted the Jeep by the side of the road. No one was inside, only the cooling engine crackled softly. Pete was still wondering where the two men had gone when he spotted between two rocks, a narrow path leading further up the mountain. A little way away, the beam of a flashlight danced.

Pete was shivering, and that was not only because of the cold. Should he really follow the burglars alone? Wasn't that a completely crazy idea? On the other hand, the darkness could protect him. He just wanted to know where the guys were going. Then he would leave.

He gathered all his courage and entered the mountain path. In the darkness, he had to be careful not to lose his way. Slowly it became steeper. Again and again, stones and boulders slid under his feet. Each time, Pete paused with bated breath. However, the dancing light in front of him continued unperturbed. No one seemed to have heard him.

Then a yellowish glow like candlelight came into view and the flashlight went out. Pete slowed his pace. About fifty metres away, some rocks rose into the air. The warm light penetrated from a crevice between them. Two shadows were silhouetted against the rock walls. Now voices could also be heard. The path led right past the rocks, so the Second Investigator crept along the slope below the path. Finally, he reached the level of the crevice and peered over a thorny bush at the ghostly scene.

The crevice led into a cave. Small candles illuminated the tiny space. In its centre, on a ledge, stood the statue of a blue-skinned deity of about half a metre high. At least half a dozen arms protruded from the body. The vapour from a few incense sticks played around the deity such that it looked as if the arms were moving... but the face remained fixed.

The two men knelt in front of the statue. They had put their hands together in prayer and kept their heads lowered. In deep voices, they chanted in a foreign language that sounded fascinating and mystical at the same time.

Pete could hardly believe what he saw. The small cave was like a temple in the middle of the wilderness, and he felt like an intruder in a sacred ritual.

The men did not notice him, but the blue deity seemed to be looking directly at him over their heads! Something reddish gleamed on its forehead. Pete narrowed his eyes. Was that a precious stone? Was that...

He had to get closer—as long as the men had their backs on him.

Pete had just taken three steps when the men suddenly stopped chanting and stood up. They bowed to the statue and turned around.

As quickly as possible, Pete wanted to take cover again. Then he stepped on loose scree, which slipped from under his foot. Pete looked for a foothold, but in his attempt to hide, he stumbled—and fell!

He slid down the slope. His hands dug into sharp-edged pebbles, unable to hold on. Suddenly a rock hurtled towards his face. Instinctively, Pete rolled over—and hit the back of his head against a hard surface. His skull rumbled like a gong. Then his eyes went black.

When Pete woke up, his skull was still pounding. He carefully felt his head and found a thick bump. Fortunately, there was no bleeding.

Fearfully, he looked up the slope. The men must have seen him or at least heard him! Nothing seemed to be happening up there.

Pete had slid downhill a few metres. Cautiously, the Second Investigator got on all fours. He listened and peered into the darkness. Nothing. He could not see the cave from here, nor any light from the candles.

Pete waited a few more minutes, and then slowly crept up the slope. He could make out the outlines of the rocks and the cave. There was no sign of the men, and not only were they gone, the small rock cave was also empty! The statue of the blue deity, the candles and the incense sticks—everything was gone!

It was as if the little temple was never there!

8. More Trouble for Pete and Bob

Bob kept looking at his watch as he wandered restlessly between a street lamp and Mr Dwiggins's house.

Pete had been gone for over an hour now. The last time he had checked in was fifty minutes ago.

Then a car approached. Bob recognized the headlights of Pete's MG.

"Well, finally!" Bob sighed.

Pete stopped next to him and lowered the side window.

"Pete! Your face!"

"What? Oh, I see. I just had a little collision with a garden gate—nothing serious. What are you standing out here for? Did Mr Dwiggins kick you out?"

"Not really... There was nothing more to talk about. Where have you been? Why didn't you call?"

Pete showed him his mobile phone. The display was criss-crossed with a spider's web of cracks. "I've had a fall. My phone is damaged."

"You fell? What happened?"

"Something incredible. Get in! If there's nothing more to sort out with Dwiggins, we'd best go home. Then I'll tell you what I saw."

"Disappeared?" Bob asked when Pete had finished his report. They were still on their way back to Rocky Beach.

"Yes!" Pete exclaimed. "The temple was gone, just like that! The statue, the men—as if they were never there! It was eerie. The deity was exactly like the one on the pendant you showed me. The men are from the Temple of Justice, Bob!"

"How long were you unconscious?" Bob wanted to know.

"A minute or so, I think."

"Probably longer than that," Bob said. "An extended period without consciousness is the more likely explanation. I suppose they heard you falling, and they had enough time to remove the statue and any other traces."

"Come to think of it, you could be right," Pete agreed.

"What about the number plate on the Jeep?" Bob asked. "Did you get it?"

Pete screwed up his face. "I wanted to photograph it, but by the time the thought came to me, I had already switched off my mobile phone. So I thought I'd just do it on the way back. Little did I know that I would fall and pass out."

"What a bummer!"

"There was something else, Bob. That statue in the rock cave—I think it had a gem on its forehead! I'm not sure as I was too far away, but... it could have been the Fiery Eye!"

Bob shook his head. "The Fiery Eye is in India. Rhandur took it back then."

"That's what I always thought... but what if... what if it's back?"

When still in Pete's car on the way back to Rocky Beach, Bob used his mobile phone to remotely access their answering machine at Headquarters. However, there was not a single message. Their e-mail inbox was also empty.

Disappointed, Pete dropped Bob off at home. They agreed to continue the investigation the next day after school, but things turned out differently.

When Pete arrived home, he was about to switch on the light in the hallway when he flinched. His parents were standing in front of him in the semi-darkness.

"Did you scare me! Has something happened?" asked Pete anxiously, for immediately he feared news about Jupiter—especially bad news.

"Has something happened?" his mother exclaimed. Her expression, which had been worried a moment ago, became angry. "Where have you been all day?"

"I... uh... was with Bob," Pete stammered. "Goodness, have I forgot an appointment?"

"No. You've obviously forgotten us!" She stepped towards him, switching on the hallway light at the same time. "Pete, your face!" She slapped her hand over her mouth. "What happened?"

"What? Oh!" Pete had almost forgotten about the bruise on his cheek. "Oh, nothing. A little slip. Nothing bad."

"A slip?" his mother repeated, shaking her head in disbelief. Pete still didn't know what was actually going on.

"Mathilda Jones called and told us what happened," his father answered, "and then you didn't come home straight after school! Can you imagine how worried we were?"

"I was at the salvage yard. Mrs Jones needed assistance and—"

"She told us that too, but that was hours ago!" Mrs Crenshaw exclaimed. "Now it's the middle of the night!"

Pete squinted at the clock. "It's not even half past nine and—"

"I've been trying to reach you all this time!" his mother continued. "I thought you were also abducted as well!"

"My phone was damaged," Pete explained, showing it to her for proof. "And what do you mean by me being 'abducted as well'?"

"You guys are onto something again!" his father said.

"No, we're not! Why does everyone believe that!"

"Are you surprised?" asked Mr Crenshaw. "After all you've done for yourselves in the last few years? But that's enough for now."

Pete looked at him questioningly.

"You and Bob will not be investigating anything for the time being."

"What?"

"This is no longer a game, Pete!" his mother warned. "Jupiter has disappeared without a trace. No one knows whether he was abducted or... whatever it was, this is not a case for you as the police are already looking for him."

Pete was about to explode. "You can't be serious! Jupe has disappeared! We have to look for him!"

His father shook his head slowly. "There is no argument about that now, my son. Your mother and I have discussed it at length. You know we never forbade you anything, even if we didn't always approve of what the three of you did in your spare time. However, this time it's different. As long as the police haven't found out anything, you two won't do anything. You will go to school and then come home. You can also help out at the salvage yard if you want, but no investigations. Do we understand each other?"

The Second Investigator knew this tone of voice. His father would not tolerate any contradiction. Pete was seething, but there was nothing he could do. If he freaked out now, he would only make things worse. So he crossed his arms and mumbled: “Yes.”

Bob sat on his bed and stared at his small television with a frown on his face. He was zapping through the news channels. Maybe something had happened somewhere involving the First Investigator. The likelihood of coming across something important this way was slim, but at least it distracted Bob from his own darkly smouldering thoughts.

There had been an accident on Interstate 405. Three people had been seriously injured and taken to hospital. However, Bob could not spot Jupiter’s motorbike on the shaky TV pictures.

In Venice, the police had busted a drug stash, and in San Diego, a criminal had escaped during a prisoner transport.

Bob’s mobile phone rang. It was Pete.

“Hi,” Bob said. “Your mobile phone is working again?”

“It’s my old one. Imagine! When I came home, my parents were standing in the hallway and—”

“You don’t have to tell me at all. I know about it. They have forbidden you to look for Jupe any further.”

“How did you know?”

“It was exactly the same for me. Your mother must have called my mother and then, in their concern for their sons, they got each other all worked up until, in their mind’s eye, they already saw us in intensive care... or locked in a dark basement... or dead under the bridge. It’s just what mothers think.”

“—And fathers,” Pete added. “That’s totally ridiculous! We’ve been in totally different situations! Really dangerous ones, I mean. They didn’t forbid us anything then!”

“Because they didn’t even know about most of the really dangerous situations we had been in,” Bob pointed out.

“True again,” Pete admitted. “So what now?”

“We still have to carry on somehow.”

Pete sighed. “But how? I never expected that this age-old case would fall at our feet again. What have Mr Rhandur and the Fiery Eye got to do with Jupe’s disappearance? I don’t understand any of this!”

“Me neither,” Bob confessed. “For sure, it has to do with the Fiery Eye, and Jupe has been dealing with it last night. We’ll probably have to do the same if we want to find him. First, I will check on Pleshiwar and the Temple of Justice. Then, we should revisit that cave temple.”

Pete laughed bitterly. “And when are we supposed to do that, when we’re supposed to come home right after school?”

“We don’t go to school.”

“Are you serious?”

“This is about Jupe, Pete! We have to find him!”

“Well, yeah,” Pete said uneasily. “I’m just saying... we’ll probably get into serious trouble.”

“What can be more serious than Jupe not coming back?”

Pete hesitated, but only briefly. “You’re right” he said... and that settled the matter.

9. The Vanished Temple

Tuesday, 16 September

The next morning, Bob and Pete met in front of the school at the usual time. While all their classmates streamed into the school building, they went the opposite direction and headed to the car park where Pete had parked his MG. When Bob noticed Mrs Fisher from afar, he had to take cover between two parked cars at the last second. He would have had English with her in the first lesson.

They hurriedly got in Pete's car and left the school grounds. After they had left Rocky Beach behind and were on their way to the mountains, Bob reported on his research findings.

"I found out something about Pleshiwar on the Internet last night. The place is very remote in the mountains. There used to be regular riots there because two religious groups clashed. On the one hand—"

"Seriously, Bob," Pete interrupted him reproachfully. "Riots in Indian mountain villages will hardly have anything to do with Jupe's disappearance."

"You're right," Bob admitted, "but let me tell you at least one thing—the members of one group worship a deity called Dhaarmikwar. They call themselves the Servants of Justice."

"Like in the Temple of Justice?"

"Right... and this very temple—has supposedly vanished."

"Huh? What do you mean by vanished? I thought that it is somewhere in Pleshiwar."

"It was in a very isolated part of the mountains near Pleshiwar. Apparently no one has seen it for years."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"There is a legend. It says that the god Dhaarmikwar makes sure that the temple is not seen by people of other faiths. The Servants of Justice now live mainly in the mountains, not in the village. Therefore, no one from Pleshiwar has seen the temple for a long time."

Pete raised his eyebrows. "A vanished temple! Like the one from last night!"

"Well, it's a legend," Bob explained. "India is full of stories like that. It doesn't have to mean anything."

"I don't really care what people in India believe, but I know what I saw here. It may well be that the burglars of last night belong to these Servants of Justice! Somehow they got to California and now they're making temples vanish here."

"We'll see if it has really vanished," Bob said. Then he looked at his mobile phone, as he had been doing constantly since yesterday. He still hoped that Jupiter would somehow get in touch, or that someone would respond to their Ghost-to-Ghost Hookup. Again, he used his mobile phone to remotely access their answering machine and checked their e-mail inbox. Nothing had come in. While on the Internet, Bob checked the local police news.

—There had been a shooting in Long Beach.

—An escaped prisoner from San Diego had been caught.

—One part of the Santa Ana Freeway was closed due to an accident.

Bob only looked up again when Pete turned into the mountain road.

“We’re almost there,” the Second Investigator announced. Nevertheless, he almost missed the turn onto the dirt road. “Everything looks so different in daylight,” Pete marvelled as the MG rumbled over the uneven path.

“There are tyre tracks up ahead!” remarked Bob.

“Yes, that’s where the Jeep was.” They got out and looked at the tyre tracks and the footprints on the dusty ground.

“Let’s go up there.” Pete pointed to the mountain path and took the lead.

The path also appeared quite different in the bright sunlight. They reached the rocks faster than Pete had expected. “It was right here! There’s the cave. Down there is where I hid and then fell.”

Curious, Bob entered the small cave. There were a few scribbles on the walls, but they had nothing to do with an Indian temple.

“Footprints,” Bob muttered as he surveyed the ground. “This spot is so sheltered from the wind that the tracks could be weeks old.”

“Look here!” Pete had crouched down and was looking at a dark spot.

“What is it?” asked Bob.

“Ash.” Pete dipped his finger into the tiny heap and smelled it. “Sandalwood.”

“How do you know that?” asked Bob in amazement.

“Because my mother has a new obsession with incense. Sometimes half the house smells of the stuff, and she loves sandalwood. I hope that phase is over soon. Anyway, this is the ash from incense sticks. So I didn’t imagine all this.”

“So everything else disappears and only the ashes remain,” Bob concluded.

“All right, but that doesn’t change the fact that the temple that was here yesterday has gone.”

They also examined the rest of the cave, but found no further clue. Finally, they made their way back in frustration.

On the way downhill, Bob had his mobile phone in his hand again. There was still no message, but there was news that the Santa Ana Freeway was now passable again... and the house of the actor Solomon Charles had been burgled.

Bob frowned. Solomon Charles? He had only come across that name yesterday. Curious, he called up the article and stopped.

“Hey Pete! Listen to this:”

Solomon Charles, 76, was the victim of a burglary last night. The burglar or burglars entered his Malibu Beach mansion and stole a valuable Indian sculpture made of pure silver in the shape of a hand. Charles, best known for starring as Secret Agent Blake Turner in the movie series of the same name, is a passionate collector of antique art treasures. How the burglars managed to outsmart the house security system is still unknown.

“A silver hand sculpture from India?” cried Pete. “That’s what Mr Dwiggins told you! Rhandur was looking for that hand at the time!”

“Indeed...” Bob remarked, “and Mr Dwiggins said that the man in the photo from the fancy dress party looked like Solomon Charles! That’s because it was Solomon Charles! We’ve got to go now!”

“To Solomon Charles?”

“Of course! Maybe that Mr White was with him! Maybe Jupe was also with him!”

Pete looked at him doubtfully. "But this is a famous actor! Secret Agent Blake Turner! How are you going to get to him?"

"We'll think about that when we get there."

Pete shook his head. "I'm just thinking about our parents and our investigation ban. We're going to get in serious trouble!"

"Serious trouble... yes," Bob agreed.

"Well, let's go!"

Finding Solomon Charles's mansion on the cliff was not difficult as there were countless sources that revealed the private addresses of famous Hollywood stars. The bright white building was perched on a rocky promontory jutting into the sea. It was surrounded by water on three sides.

"So this is where Secret Agent Blake Turner lives," Pete said as the house came into view. "Cool. This place looks like the secret base of a movie villain."

"What's not cool at all, though, is that we're not alone," Bob remarked, pointing to the numerous paparazzi loitering by the side of the road. Hoping for a usable snapshot, they had pushed their forearm-length telephoto lenses through the high bars that surrounded the property. Yet from here, one had a rather poor view of the house because of a row of cleverly planted trees.

Pete and Bob watched the scenery as they drove slowly past the property. Finally, Pete parked a short distance away just before the junction with the coastal highway. From here, they had a good overview of the headland.

"What a bummer..." Pete muttered. "Mr Charles is under siege, probably because of the break-in. How are we going to talk to him now? He'll never open the door for us! And we can't get into his property any other way without being photographed by a hundred paparazzi. Normally I'd say we'd go around the back—but there's the sea."

Bob grimaced. At first glance, he also found the mission rather hopeless. Then he had an idea. "Come with me!"

He walked back down the road to a spot from which one could see the sea, and at the same time not far from the fence around the property.

"What are you going to do?"

Instead of answering, Bob suddenly pointed to the sea and shouted: "There he is! That's Solomon Charles in that boat!"

"What, where?" Pete narrowed his eyes. He saw a lot of boats, but they were all too far away to make out the people in them.

"Well, there!"

"Nonsense, Bob, you can't—"

Bob gave him a kick and murmured softly: "Play along, Pete!"

Then the Second Investigator understood. "Indeed!" he shouted loudly, noticing from the corner of his eye how some paparazzi turned to them curiously. "Yes, that's him! He's taking off in the boat so he won't be photographed!"

Instantly, the crowd of photographers began to move. Within a short time, Bob and Pete were surrounded, but no one paid them any attention. Everyone peered through their telephoto lenses and searched the water.

The two hurried away. In front of the entrance gate, Pete clasped his hands together to give Bob a leg-up to climb over. He himself managed it without help.

Across Solomon Charles's carefully manicured lawn, they hurried between the pine trees planted as a screen towards the mansion. They wanted to be out of sight before the photographers realized what was happening and came back.

Only when there were enough trees behind them did they stop running and walk more slowly towards the house. The building had a futuristic sixties architecture, and its basic shape was round. As the floors were offset from each other, it looked like a pie that had gone askew.

They had almost reached the entrance when suddenly a window flew open on the first floor and an old man with tanned skin, grey hair and a stubbly beard looked down at them angrily.

It took a moment for Bob and Pete to realize that it was indeed Solomon Charles. His trademark narrow moustache was all overgrown, and he looked pretty scruffy in other ways too. His voice sounded exactly as they knew it from his movies.

What he said, or rather yelled angrily, could well have come from a movie: "Damn! Now I've had enough, this time you'll end up in prison! The police are already on their way!"

10. Secret Agent Blake Turner

“Mr Charles!” shouted Bob, startled, up at the window. “It’s not what you think! We are not paparazzi!”

“We don’t even have a camera!” Pete quickly added.

“Then what are you doing on my property?”

“We want to talk to you about the burglary!”

“So you’re from the press after all,” Charles growled. “I’ve really had enough of this. I’m calling the police!”

“I thought he’s already called them?” Pete said to Bob in amazement.

“No, I haven’t!” shouted Charles, who obviously had very good hearing, from above.

“That was just a threat! But I’m doing it now!” He turned away from the window.

“Wait!” Bob asked. “It’s complicated, but we need to talk to you.”

“I don’t want to talk to you!” retorted Charles, already holding his phone.

“It’s about your old friend Horatio August!”

Charles lowered the phone and eyed Bob and Pete long and hard. “Who are you?”

“Bob Andrews and Pete Crenshaw,” Bob said. “We are investigators.”

In terse words, Bob and Pete told of Jupiter and their suspicion that his disappearance was connected to Horatio August’s bequest. Charles listened attentively, then wordlessly stepped away from the window and closed it.

“What’s going on now?” asked Pete. “Does he believe us or not?”

The question was answered when the front door opened a minute later. Solomon Charles appeared in the doorway, barefoot and dressed in a silver silk men’s kimono. Up close, his face looked tired and wrinkled. He put on his glasses and blinked in surprise.

“Well, you’re just two rascals! Well, come in, come in, I don’t want to be in the line of fire any longer than necessary. The paparazzi sometimes even hide in the trees.” With that, he had already gone back inside the house.

Bob and Pete stepped through the door.

“Actually, I couldn’t care less,” Charles continued. “I’m allowed to look however I want. Let them print me in the paper in a dressing gown if they want! I don’t care!”

He led them into a huge, light-flooded living room. For a brief moment, their breath was taken away. It looked like a museum in here! Objects of art lay, stood and hung everywhere—African masks made of wood, bronze Buddhas, vases made of jade and wafer-thin porcelain, knives with obsidian blades—everything carefully staged and illuminated.

The actual living area was limited to a small corner furnished with futuristic furniture. Through a large glass front, one looked out to a terrace that partly jutted out over a steeply sloping cliff. Behind it was the Pacific Ocean. A hole the size of a medicine ball gaped in the glass pane.

“So you say you are investigators?”

Bob nodded. “May I give you our card?” He reached into his pocket, took out their business card and handed it to the actor.

“Well, well,” Charles merely murmured and slipped the card into the pocket of his kimono.

“—And this is our friend Jupiter,” Pete said, showing Mr Charles a photo of the First Investigator. “Have you seen him before?”

Solomon Charles shook his head. “Sorry.”

Disappointed, they lowered their shoulders.

“Do you want a coffee? Or do you need something stronger? Perhaps you’re probably a bit too young for that.”

They gratefully accepted the offer of coffee and Solomon Charles began to fiddle with a shiny chrome coffee machine. It hissed and hummed, but apparently didn’t quite do what it was supposed to.

“Stupid machine,” Charles growled, banging it with his fist. Whirring, the coffee ran into the cups provided. “There you go. There you go.”

“You have an impressive house, Mr Charles,” Bob said as the actor put the coffee down for them. “—And an impressive collection.”

“I know,” Charles said immodestly. “After all, I have collected art from all over the world all my life, but the burglars only stole one item. They had no interest in the rest.” He pointed to a metre-high pedestal of black stone, lit by a small overhead spotlight. There was nothing on it.

“How did the burglars get in here?” Pete wanted to know.

Charles grinned mockingly. “Are you really investigators?”

“They broke the window, yes,” Pete said, stroking the sharp edges of the broken glass with his fingertips. “—But how did they get on the terrace in the first place? It’s practically hovering over the abyss.”

“Across the sea. I guess. It’s the only explanation.” Solomon Charles pushed open the door and motioned for them to follow him.

The terrace had a large outdoor spa and a covered dining area. From here, one had a fantastic view. Not far away, a tiny rocky island rose out of the water. Pete had to smile. That was Santa Clarita Island—the island with the old Spanish fortress. No one should now say that he wasn’t paying attention at school!

As Pete leaned over the railing, a warm updraught ran through his hair. For a brief moment, he felt dizzy. Ten metres below him, the waves were crashing against the rocks.

“They must have docked a boat down there and climbed up the rocks,” Mr Charles said.

“Quite dangerous,” Pete thought.

“So what happened with your alarm system?” asked Bob.

“It was on, and it is linked to a private security company. The alarm went off immediately, but I wasn’t at home, as I was at my weekly poker game in Beverly Hills. The damned guys must have known that. I hope the police catches them.”

“Did the security officers see any of them?” Pete asked.

“No, by the time the security officers got here, the burglars were long gone,” Mr Charles said, “but I did give the police a description of the possible perpetrators.”

“How do you know of the possible perpetrators?” Bob asked.

“I don’t know directly... but I have been warned,” the actor replied. “The information I gave to the police might be sketchy, but maybe that might give them a lead to a gang of Indian thieves.”

“A gang of Indian thieves?” asked Pete and Bob almost simultaneously.

“Yes, that’s what I have been told,” Mr Charles said.

Bob frowned. “—By a certain Mr White?”

“Aha!” said Mr Charles in surprise, scratching his stubbly chin. “You really are investigators! All right, boys, let’s go back inside, and then you tell me your story! After that,

I'll tell you mine. It sounds like it could be interesting!"

They returned into the house and sat down in white, goblet-shaped armchairs. Charles listened attentively to the two investigators, nodding thoughtfully now and then.

"We had hoped that we would find a trace of Jupiter with you here in your house," Bob ended, "but until we have one, all we can do is try to uncover the connections surrounding Horatio August. Maybe we'll find out what happened to Jupiter that way."

"That sounds like a case for Secret Agent Blake Turner!" said Mr Charles. "You know, I used to really want to be an agent, or an explorer, or an investigator like you guys. Instead, I became an actor playing such roles. Anyway, a little bit of Blake Turner rubbed off on me! And my agent instincts tell me we're all in on the same thing. What has Horatio got us into?"

"How well did you know him?" Bob wanted to know.

"Probably better than most, and especially for a long time. We went to school together. That was... what... sixty years ago! We were both still living in England then. Anyway, we were great friends, both very adventurous. We were both drawn to the world, but in the end Horatio had more courage than me. He dropped out of school a year before graduating to join a merchant ship and travel the world. Whenever I could, I too went to distant lands and started collecting ancient cultural treasures. Basically I just took holiday trips but Horatio had real adventures! You could make a movie out of that—several, in fact!"

"What's the deal with the Silver Hand?" asked Bob.

"He brought it back to me from one of his trips. He had borrowed a large sum of money from me and couldn't pay it back for quite a while. Instead, he turned up one day with this hand. It must have come from an ancient Indian temple where it had been part of a statue of a god."

Bob and Pete cast furtive glances at each other.

"I recognized the value of this hand and accepted it as repayment of his debt. He never wanted to tell me where he got it from, that secretive man. Sometimes I didn't see him for a whole year. Then when I asked him what he had experienced, he was always very evasive."

"What do you think he did?" asked Pete.

Solomon Charles shrugged his shoulders. "Adventurous things... dangerous things... There was a situation... I think it was on the very night he offered me the Silver Hand. We sat together for a long time and I remember how changed he seemed to me. Thoughtful and introverted, but we had drunk a lot and that loosened his tongue. He pulled up his shirt and I saw on his upper body, were scars... from knife wounds!"

Again, Bob and Pete exchanged brief glances. They knew about these scars. Mr Dwiggins had told them about this four years ago, although the cause of the injuries had been unknown to him.

"I was shocked and wanted to know what had happened, but he just waved it off. 'It's better if you don't know, Solomon,' he said. 'Only one thing I want to tell you—if you ever meet a dark-skinned man with three tattooed dots on his forehead, beware! He is dangerous!'"

11. Horatio's Warnings

"Three-Dots..." Pete said sombrely. "Horatio was running away from him."

"Then he said that everything would be different now," Mr Charles continued. "He had made a decision and got out."

"Got out?" repeated Bob. "From where?"

"I wanted to know that too, but he didn't elaborate. It almost sounded as if he had been a member of a criminal gang. He said he wanted to start a new life, probably also for Bonnie's sake."

"Bonnie? Who's that?" Bob wanted to know.

"That was his girlfriend at the time. He met her in India, but they were only a couple for a few years. I never found out what Horatio had been involved in. All I know is that it almost cost him his life. You know, I often envied him for his adventurous life. Acting is actually insanely boring. You wait your turn all day, and then you recite your lines. Horatio has really had some adventures! Real adventures! But after that night, I wouldn't trade places with him."

Charles took a sip of coffee and continued thoughtfully: "After that meeting, Horatio started to build up his trading business. He was very busy and our contact faded more and more over time. It was a pity because for some years, he had been my best friend. When he died, it affected me deeply, even though we had hardly seen each other."

Solomon Charles pushed himself up from the sofa and went to a shelf where there were not only many books on art and archaeology, but also some framed photos. He picked up one of them and showed it to Bob and Pete. "This is the only photo I have of him."

"The twenties party," Bob realized. "That must be the photo that Mr Dwiggins also has. That's you, Horatio in the middle—and is that Horatio's girlfriend at the time on the right? Bonnie?"

Mr Charles nodded.

"What do you know about her?"

"Nothing at all," said Charles. "I've only seen her two or three times and that was ages ago!"

"Do you know her full name?"

Mr Charles thought for a moment. "Newman," he finally said. "Bonnie Newman. Yes, that was her name."

"It might be worth talking to her," Bob said, making a note of the name. "Maybe she knows what dark things Horatio was involved in back then."

"With her and with this Mr White," Pete said. "He phoned Gus's father, was with Mr Dwiggins, and with you. Tell us about him!"

"He contacted me a fortnight ago and introduced himself as an old friend of Horatio. He wanted to talk to me, so I invited him to my house here."

"He must have recognized you from the photo at Mr Dwiggins's," Bob surmised.

"Did you know him?" Pete wanted to know. "Was he really an old friend of Horatio's?"

"I knew him from stories. Horatio had mentioned him a few times. They travelled together for a while, but I guess they lost track of each other later. Today White is an

archaeologist or something like that, and so he got to hear that there had been an earthquake in northern India recently—near a place called... oh, damn, now I forgot the name—”

“Pleshiwar,” Pete said.

“Pleshiwar!” confirmed Charles. “Exactly.”

“I read about the earthquake as well,” Bob said.

“Something was uncovered by this earthquake—a cave, a ruin, I don’t remember exactly.”

“A chamber in a palace,” Bob helped him.

“Right! And in this chamber they found old writings of the maharaja that spoke of two items that had something to do with a temple—a ruby, and a sculpture of a hand made of silver. Mr White’s ears perked up—because he knew these two items! He had heard about this from Horatio many decades ago! Naturally, White wanted to find out where the ruby and the Hand had gone to, and tried to track down old friends and relatives of Horatio. That’s how he finally came to me.”

“And he hit a jackpot in a way,” Bob said, “because the Silver Hand is in your possession!”

“—Was...” Solomon Charles corrected emphatically, looking at the empty stone platform. “White was thrilled! He wanted to buy it from me, and said that the Hand belonged in India. He also suspected that Horatio stole it at that time, or at least acquired it unlawfully. That might even be true, but unless he could prove it to me, of course I wasn’t going to give him the Hand.

“White understood that. He said what was important was to recover the two items first, before being concerned over the ownership. The Hand was safe with me. He said he would get back to me as soon as he found out more.”

“But the Fiery Eye, that is the ruby, has long been back in India,” Pete interjected. “Mr Rhandur bought it from Horatio’s grand-nephew back then and took it back.” He frowned and thought of the previous night, specifically of the reddish glow on the forehead of the statue of the god. “Didn’t he?”

“I don’t know anything about that,” Charles said, “but White gave me a warning.”

“What was the warning?” Bob wanted to know.

“He said that the people from the temple were very devout. These two items have great significance for them. They have been searching for them for ages... and they would do anything to get them back. I remembered Horatio’s warning about the man with the three tattooed dots, but I must confess that I didn’t take it seriously. After all, the Hand had been in my living room for decades. Why would any religious Indians get the idea of looking for it here now, of all times?”

“That’s a good question,” said Bob, who had just had the same thought running through his head. “Apparently that’s exactly what happened.”

Charles nodded. “You have that robbery at that lawyer’s house, then the break-in at mine. White was right with his warning.”

“Bob,” Pete said excitedly. “Those Indians must have abducted Jupe!”

“I don’t know, Pete,” Bob said doubtfully.

“It must have been! Dwiggins was attacked, the Silver Hand was stolen, Gus disappeared and Jupe too. It’s all connected! Three-Dots was not to be trifled with back then, Bob. If we’re dealing with a whole gang of three-dotted people now, Jupe is in great danger!”

Bob wasn’t convinced but at the moment, he couldn’t get the facts together to form a better theory. “We need to talk to this Mr White,” he said. “Mr Charles, can you give us his address or number?”

“Of course,” Charles said and pushed himself off the sofa once more. He walked over to a small, very tidy desk in the corner. “He left me his card. It must be here somewhere. Just a minute... What a bummer, where is the stupid thing? Oh, damn, now I remember! I tidied up here two days ago. I must have thrown it away then!”

“Thrown away?” repeated Pete, startled, “but why so?”

“I guess I didn’t intend to part with the Silver Hand so I wouldn’t need his card anymore. After all, I couldn’t have known that the Hand would be stolen from me and that I would want to contact him!”

“Oh, no!” said Pete. “What are we going to do?”

“Don’t panic, the card should still be in the bin. It’s in the garage. Come with me!”

Bob and Pete followed Solomon Charles into the front part of the mansion, where a short flight of stairs led down into a spacious garage. An old black BMW and a red Ferrari were parked here. The garage door to the outside was closed.

“Here are the bins,” Charles said, opening the lid of the first one. “Paper,” he said. “Somewhere in here should be the business card.”

Bob took a look in the bin. There was not much to rummage through, but when he leaned in, his fingertips barely reached the top layer of rubbish. He tried to get deeper, stood on his tiptoes and finally hung with his legs in the air.

Just when Bob realized that he would never find the business card this way, the bin tipped over. Its contents—Bob and the paper—spilled onto the ground.

Pete started to laugh, but a whirring sound silenced him. There was light, and the garage door opened!

“Don’t panic, you just fell into the light barrier area, Bob,” Mr Charles explained. “The garage door opens automatically from the inside when—”

Something flashed brightly... and then again... and again.

“Paparazzi!” shouted Pete in alarm, pointing outside into the garden where the flash had come from. A photographer was crouching behind a rhododendron bush, pointing his lens right at the open garage... and Bob, who was lying on the ground in front of the overturned bin.

“Damn you!” Charles shouted and ran out. “Get out of here, you rascal!”

“I’ll get him!” shouted Pete, but Charles held him back.

“Leave him! It’s no use... unfortunately,” Charles said. “So there’ll be another little headline tomorrow. I don’t care anymore!” He flicked a switch on the wall and the garage door closed.

“He’s got me in his photo,” Bob growled as he got to his feet.

“Don’t worry about it,” Charles advised. “The press is certainly less interested in you than in me, if I may state so immodestly.”

“Let’s hope so,” Bob murmured, but an uneasy feeling remained.

They turned their attention to the scraps of paper on the floor. After a short time, Bob found what he was looking for.

“Tadaaa!” he shouted and held a small white card under Pete’s nose. It said:

*Gabriel White
California Heritage Institute
Camarillo*

“We’ve got his contact details at last!” cried Pete, relieved. “I’ll call right away!”

The Second Investigator pulled his mobile phone out of his pocket and dialled the number on the card.

“Yes, hello! My name is Pete Crenshaw. I’d like to speak to Mr White, please... Oh, he’s not in? Could you perhaps give me his mobile number? ... It’s kind of urgent, yeah, it’s really urgent. In fact, it’s kind of an emergency... No, I’m not exaggerating. Listen, a friend of ours has disappeared and Mr White might know something about it... No, I’m not kidding! Perhaps I give you my number instead and could you ask him to contact me—Pete Crenshaw.” Pete gave the secretary his mobile phone number.

Suddenly, Solomon took the phone from Pete’s hand. “Hello there! This is Solomon Charles speaking... Yes, Secret Agent Blake Turner! I know Mr White. I advise you to get him to speak to my young friend Pete immediately, do you understand me? ... Good. We’ll expect his call back soon.”

Charles hung up and handed the phone back to Pete.

“Thank you very much,” Pete said, flabbergasted.

“You are two clever boys—inquisitive and full of adventure. You deserve to be given a hand, but do me a favour—stay as you are! Whenever you encounter an adventure—don’t let it pass you by. Don’t choose the safe path like I did. Throw yourselves into the middle of it!”

Pete laughed out. “Don’t worry, Mr Charles. Our leader Jupiter won’t give us any choice at all—if we can find him.”

“Who, if not you!” The actor held out his hand to the boys. “And when you have succeeded, get in touch with me! I want to know how this story ends!”

12. 'The Paparazzi are Getting Bolder!'

Pete and Bob decided to go back to Rocky Beach and continue their discussions at Headquarters. It was good timing because they would reach there shortly after the time school ended.

The huge wrought-iron gate to the salvage yard was locked and there was a sign that said 'Closed Today'. Understandably, Uncle Titus and Aunt Mathilda didn't have the nerve to carry on their business while Jupiter was gone.

Bob and Pete decided to enter the yard through one of their secret entrances hidden in the fence. They walked down the outside of the front fence on which was painted a stormy ocean scene, with a ship struggling through huge waves. In the foreground was a fish poking its head up from the sea to stare at the ship. Bob pressed on the eye of the fish. That triggered a mechanism to swing two boards up, revealing a narrow opening. This was Green Gate One, known only to The Three Investigators.

The two of them squeezed through and found themselves in Jupe's outdoor workshop. Bob took a peep around a huge pile of scrap metal and saw a strangely deserted salvage yard.

Headquarters also seemed deserted to them, as if no one had been here for years. Without Jupiter at the computer or Jupiter with a book in his hand on the sofa, their trailer looked like an abandoned storeroom.

There were still no replies from the Hookup, in both the answering machine and the e-mail inbox.

"I didn't expect this," Pete said disappointedly. "We've never been this unsuccessful with the Ghost-to-Ghost Hookup! What are we going to do besides wait for Mr White to call us back?"

Bob glanced at the notes he had made on Solomon Charles. "Bonnie Newman," he said. "We should try to track down Horatio's former girlfriend."

Pete sighed. "I don't know, Bob. Do you think there's any point to do that? We're running after this Horatio story like a dog after a bone... but in our case, the bone is Jupe!"

"I know, Pete, but we have no other leads. It's the only thing we can do. That's why I have to try to find Bonnie Newman. Maybe Jupe was with her!" Bob set to work, while Pete set about clearing up the mess in the trailer.

A while later, they heard noises in the yard. Curious, Pete looked through 'See-All'—the periscope they built from mirrors and stove pipes that jutted out from the roof of the trailer to the outside. With it, they could spy out the salvage yard unnoticed.

He was startled. Uncle Titus and Aunt Mathilda were about to open the main gate. They were receiving visitors—his parents!

"What are they doing here?" Pete snapped.

"Huh?" asked Bob absently, as he was already engrossed in the search for Bonnie Newman.

Pete no longer answered. He was already on his way out through the Cold Gate.

His parents saw him immediately. "That's what I thought!" his father exclaimed. "Tell me, are you out of your senses? Shouldn't you be at school?"

"Uh... it's now after school," Pete replied.

“Don’t act as if I don’t know!”

Before Pete could wriggle out of the situation, a car pulled up to the road. Bob’s parents got out, and they looked pretty annoyed.

“Is Robert here too?” Mr Andrews wanted to know without bothering with a greeting.

“Yes, uh, he’s inside.” Pete smelled trouble and denial probably wouldn’t do any good.

“Then get him out here!” Bob’s father snapped.

But that was not necessary. Bob had just came out, looking at a piece of paper in his hand, without noticing what had been going on outside.

“Pete! I found Bonnie Newman!” he yelled. “It was easy, she doesn’t live far—” Then he spotted his parents. “Mum! Dad! What are you doing here?”

“You know exactly what’s going on, Robert!” his father said angrily.

Uncle Titus cleared his throat. “Maybe we’ll go to the verandah and continue,” he suggested quietly, pointing at the salvage yard office.

As there were not enough chairs, their parents remained standing while Bob and Pete sat as if on a dock.

“We were given this photo half an hour ago for the gossip page of tomorrow’s edition,” Bob’s father said. He was an editor at the *Los Angeles Times*. “Can you explain this to us?”

He held a photo under their noses. It showed Bob kneeling among scraps of paper in front of an overturned bin while a horrified Solomon Charles in a silver kimono rushed towards him.

While Bob turned white as a sheet, Pete tried to suppress a laugh, but he did not quite succeed.

“You certainly have nothing to laugh about, son!” interjected Mr Crenshaw. “You’re in the photo as well.”

“The photographer suggested the following caption: ‘The Paparazzi are Getting Bolder—Now They’re Going Through the Stars’ Rubbish!’ What do you have to say about this?” Mr Andrews demanded.

“That is so hypocritical!” Pete got upset. “The photographer was brazen! Not us!”

“That’s not the point at all now!” Mr Crenshaw snapped.

“We had an agreement,” Pete’s mother reminded him. “You were supposed to come home after school or help out here, but you weren’t at school at all! I called the school’s office. Where were you?”

“We—” Pete began.

“We’ve been investigating,” Bob confessed, lowering his eyes. “Because of Jupe... and this photo was a stupid coincidence. We were just looking for a lead and then this photographer came out of nowhere...”

“You were looking for a lead?” echoed his mother. “In Solomon Charles’s rubbish bin?”

“Uh, yeah... together,” Bob admitted.

“You should be in school!” his mother exclaimed.

Mathilda Jones was unusually quiet, but the concern that was expressed in her face suddenly silenced everyone. “Have you found anything?” she finally asked.

Pete’s and Bob’s parents looked over at the Jones couple. Apparently they only now remembered that there were more important things than the behaviour of their sons.

“I understand that you are concerned about them,” Aunt Mathilda continued, “but if they have found out something the police missed... anything that tells us where Jupe is... I just want to—” She faltered.

“We’ve found out a few things, yes,” Bob said. “So far, no sign of Jupe himself, but a number of clues as to what he might have been into.”

“Like what?” Uncle Titus wanted to know.

“Apparently it has something to do with an old case of ours. It seems to be bigger than we thought. It’s about a ruby and a silver hand sculpture, and about people who want them.” Bob tried to summarize as succinctly as possible everything they knew so far.

“This is completely outrageous!” exclaimed Mr Andrews.

“—But we are making progress!” Bob defended himself. “Mr Charles could tell us a few things, and surely Bonnie Newman knows something about the story as well. After all, she was Horatio’s girlfriend. We should talk to her. She lives in Oxnard. It’s not far from here.”

“Absolutely not,” said the Crenshaws and the Andrews at the same time.

“But we have to go there!” said Pete. “She’s an old lady! I’m sure it’s not at all dangerous!”

“That’s not the point at all!” his mother flared up. “We had an agreement and you didn’t stick to it. Do you really think we’re going to let you go off again as a reward?”

“No, that’s not it, Mum!” Pete burst out. “It’s about Jupe! What’s so hard to understand about that? If there’s anything we can do to find him, we have to do it! We understand that you are worried, but... but—”

The Second Investigator realized that he had no argument against his parents’ concerns. “—But there’s nothing we can do about that. We can only help Jupe... and look out for each other. Nothing more...”

A brief silence gripped the conversation until Titus Jones leaned forward and grasped Mrs Crenshaw’s hand on his right and Mr Andrews’s forearm on his left. Bob’s father almost flinched as if he were afraid of Uncle Titus’s desperation like a contagious disease.

“Please,” Uncle Titus said quietly, “let them go there.”

“I understand your concern, Titus, but—” Mr Andrews began.

“No. You don’t understand them, Bill. Your boy is here. Mine is—” Titus Jones fell silent.

“The three of them always looked out for each other,” Aunt Mathilda continued. “If Bob and Pete had disappeared, Jupe would do everything he could to find them. They have a good chance, because the boys are smarter than the police as they’ve shown that often enough. Sure, Titus and I would be just as worried as you are now, but in the end... what difference does it make. The three of them won’t let anyone change their minds.” She looked round, with tears in her eyes.

Bob’s and Pete’s parents exchanged perplexed looks.

In the middle of the silence, something suddenly creaked. It was a familiar sound coming from the direction of the outdoor workshop.

Pete and Bob looked at each other. “That was... that was—” Bob began. He wanted to say ‘Green Gate One’, but stopped short of blurting it out in front of all present.

If there were some sound coming from Green Gate One, that could only mean one thing.

“Jupe!” they both gasped at the same time and jumped up from their chairs.

13. Father and Son Teams

They rushed down from the verandah and ran straight to the outdoor workshop, but when they reached there, there was no one.

“Jupe?” called Pete, looking around the workbench.

“Someone was here!” Bob was convinced. “We both heard it!” He activated the secret mechanism to open Green Gate One and then looked out into the street.

“There!” he shouted as he saw a woman get into a white van a little way away. “That’s Tiger Girl!”

They squeezed outside and ran after her, but by then the engine was already howling and the van shot off.

“Damn!” Bob gave up the chase. The van turned the corner with screeching tyres and was gone. “I cannot even see the licence plate number.”

“Me neither. Are you sure that was Tiger Girl?”

“Absolutely.”

“What was she doing here?” Pete wondered. “How did she know about Green Gate One?”

“I don’t know,” Bob confessed. “Maybe she was snooping around Headquarters.”

“Then she could have got in through Tunnel Two.”

“Who knows? If she has something to do with Jupe’s disappearance...”

Frustrated, they went back to the outdoor workshop through Green Gate One.

“We have to check Headquarters,” Bob said.

“Perhaps I’d better get back to them in case they come here,” Pete suggested. “You go ahead.”

“Okay,” Bob said as he tore away the grating in front of Tunnel Two and scrambled in.

When Pete went back to the verandah, Aunt Mathilda breathlessly asked: “What happened?”

“The young customer who spoke to you yesterday afternoon—she’s a spy,” Pete explained.

“You mean she just broke in here?” Uncle Titus asked. “How did she get in? The main gate is closed.”

“Uh...” Pete hesitated and then said: “Perhaps she climbed over the fence. Bob is checking our trailer to see if she was in there.” He then reported what they knew about Tiger Girl.

“We have to keep investigating,” Pete concluded, more determined than ever.

“But the police—”

“Mum!” he interrupted his mother. “The police can’t do anything if we tell them that Tiger Girl was just here at the salvage yard. We don’t have a licence plate number or anything.”

Meanwhile, Bob looked around inside Headquarters. Despite the mess there, which they had no time to clear up, everything seemed to be exactly as they had left it twenty minutes ago. Just as he was about to leave the trailer, the telephone rang.

"It's about time!" Bob shouted and grabbed the handset. "The Three Investigators. Bob Andrews speaking!"

"Hello, this is Shekinah Smith. Are you the person I'm supposed to call about a motorbike?"

"Yes, that's me," Bob confirmed. "Did you see the bike?"

"Yes."

"Really?" cried Bob. "Where? When?"

"Just now. Near the marina in Leo Carrillo State Beach. I was there with my mother. We have a small boat moored there. The motorbike was by the road and it matched the description that my buddy Jack gave me on the phone this morning. Anyway, I thought, this could be the motorbike you people are looking for, and bingo—the licence plate number matched too. So I came back and called you."

Bob frantically jotted down the details and the caller's contact in case of future need.

"Thank you, Shekinah!" he cried enthusiastically. "Many, many, many thousands of thanks! You can't imagine how much you've helped us!"

Then he rushed back to the office verandah and reported excitedly: "The Hookup was successful! Jupe's motorbike has been found."

"His what?" asked Aunt Mathilda, surprised. "But Jupe doesn't have a motorbike at all!"

"Oh!" said Bob.

"He used to have one, but I forbade him to use it... oh... wait a minute! Are you telling me that he kept that thing all this while? And that he rode away with it?"

"Uh... yes," Bob confessed. Before it could occur to Aunt Mathilda that they had kept this information from her all this time, he quickly added: "—But now it's been found! By a girl in Leo Carrillo State Beach. It's at a little marina."

"We have to go there right away!" shouted Pete. For a brief moment, he had forgotten that their investigative work was still on the back burner. Then he called himself to order inwardly. They had to continue. The less doubt he left about it, the better. Challengingly, he looked at his parents.

"All right," said his father.

Pete was surprised. He had not expected such a sudden change of heart.

"—But I'm coming with you," Mr Crenshaw added.

Pete's sense of triumph collapsed. "What? No!"

"I won't let you go alone. It's too dangerous."

"But—"

'—But it's not dangerous at all!'

'—But we are used to doing this!'

'—But we are not babies any more!'

'—But you'll just be interrupting!'

None of the answers that flashed through Pete's mind would have worked. His father's eyes told him that he was not going to change his decision. A glance around also told him that all the other adults thought the proposal was an excellent idea.

"I had exactly the same thought!" said Mr Andrews. "It can't be all bad, can it? What about it, Henry—are we going together?"

"No!" cried Bob, startled. "I mean... that's really... not necessary—"

But his father clapped his hands energetically. "If we now have a hot lead, let's not waste any time!"

The sun coloured the sky red and warm evening air blew through the windows of the yellow Beetle as Bob and his father drove along the coastal road towards Leo Carrillo State Beach a short time later. They had decided to split up. Pete was on his way to Bonnie Newman with Mr Crenshaw at the same time.

Bob didn't feel like talking and pretended to have to concentrate on the traffic, while his father chattered incessantly.

"You know, Bob, I really like what's happening here. Well, not that Jupiter has disappeared, for goodness' sake! But that we're spending time together! We hardly see each other anymore. I work a lot and you're always somewhere else... Other fathers go camping or fishing or mountain climbing or something with their sons. We never did that!"

"We've been camping before," Bob objected quietly, but his father didn't elaborate.

"But you know, this is much better! A real adventure! And now I finally know what you guys are up to when you work on a case! That's great! Don't you think?"

"Sensational," Bob murmured.

"Watch out, there's a guy braking up ahead. You shouldn't drive so close."

Bob sighed.

Beyond Malibu, the coast was sparsely populated. They drove through this lonely, barren area until a sign at a junction pointed the way to the marina.

"Here we are," Bob said. "Shekinah said the motorbike was parked by the road... there it is!"

There was a small restaurant just past the junction, but it seemed to have been out of business for some time. The doors and windows were barricaded. Jupiter's motorbike was parked right in front of it.

Bob got out of the car and examined it closely. The bike looked the same as always. The helmet dangled from the handlebars. He turned towards the restaurant and circled the flat building, but found nothing suspicious.

Then his eyes fell on the pavement. Someone had drawn something there with chalk.

"There!" Bob cried excitedly and ran towards it. "A white question mark! Juve's secret sign! And there's an arrow! It's pointing to the marina! Come on, Dad, back to the car!"

His father nodded in amazement.

They drove down a narrow winding road to the small marina. Boats and yachts bobbed on the waves, with a last few of them just coming back to tie up in time for nightfall. Two seagulls were fighting over rubbish lying next to a rubbish bin, otherwise everything was peaceful.

The harbour master's office was in a small steel container. The man behind the desk, however, was in the middle of a conversation with a couple in white sailing gear.

"We'll have a look around first," Bob said and walked to the wooden jetty where about ten boats were moored on each side. On some of them, the owners were still taking in the sails. Elsewhere, people were already calling it a day.

Bob let his gaze wander to the left and right. He had almost given up hope of finding anything else. Then he saw another question mark at the very end of the jetty! It had been hastily scrawled on the wooden platform. The adjacent berth was not occupied at the moment. Curious, Bob crouched down.

"Looking for something?" A bearded man on a folding chair squinted at him from under his peaked cap pulled low on his face as he chewed on a pipe. "Your backpack, perhaps?"

"Backpack?" asked Bob.

"Yes, I found one—right where you are now," the man said. "It was the... night before last during my shift. I'm the night watchman here."

“A black backpack, medium size, three stripes on the side—white, blue and green?” asked Bob.

“Ah, so it really is yours then!”

“No,” Bob confessed. “It belongs to a friend of mine. His name is Jupiter Jones. He’s been missing for two days. We are looking for him.” Bob showed the man the photo of Jupiter.

“Missing, you say?” The night watchman looked at the photo closely. “Hmm... never seen him before. I looked inside the backpack, of course, because I wanted to find something about the owner. There weren’t any in it, though, just a weird gadget.”

“A gadget?”

“Yeah, some... thingamabob.” He waved it off. “You’ll see. The backpack is in the harbour master’s office. My colleague will give it to you.”

“Did you notice anything the night before last?” asked Bob. “Anything unusual?”

The man scratched his head under his cap. He suddenly looked embarrassed. “Unusual? No. What could be unusual here in the middle of the night?”

“Well, for example, a boy with a backpack hanging around.”

“—Because he’s probably been abducted,” Mr Andrews now interjected.

The man cleared his throat. “Abducted? Goodness! No, there was nothing the night before last... not that I know of.”

Then it dawned on Bob. The night watchman couldn’t answer his question—because he was asleep! But he didn’t want to rub the man’s nose in it, so he said: “Well, your container is quite far away. You probably couldn’t see my friend at all.”

“That’s how it had been,” the man grumbled.

“Do you know which boat is usually there at the end of the jetty?”

“You’ll have to ask the harbour master. He can check.”

“Thank you very much!” Bob nodded curtly and went to the container office together with his father.

It was warm and stuffy in the small office. A whirring table fan provided little relief.

“Oh, the backpack,” grumbled the man behind the counter. He reached behind him and handed Bob the backpack. “You’d better look inside now! Don’t let it be said later that I stole something!”

Bob pulled open the zip.

There was a bottle of water, a flashlight... and the thingamabob.

Bob gasped for breath.

It was the receiver for their tracking transmitter!

14. Something is Wrong

Bonnie Newman's house stood in a quiet suburban neighbourhood on the outskirts of Oxnard. Now, just before dinnertime, there were no more kids playing on the driveways, and the sprinklers were turned on. All was peaceful.

"Wouldn't you rather stay in the car?" asked Pete hesitantly after he had parked the MG.

"Of course not! Why do you think I came along?"

Pete suppressed a sigh. He had not seriously expected his father to hold back either. "All right," he said and got out.

Unlike the other front gardens, Bonnie Newman's was somewhat overgrown. The house was also not in good shape.

"Looks like nobody cares about this house," Henry Crenshaw remarked on his way to the door.

Before Pete could say anything, his father had already rung the doorbell. There was no movement inside. The second time, Pete rang the bell. He thought he heard footsteps inside and knocked on the door. "Miss Newman?" he called.

It took another few moments, then they heard footsteps on a staircase. Finally the door opened.

In front of them stood an old woman with white hair that fell smoothly to her shoulders. She wore a colourful floral dress. Her posture was bent and her hand on the doorknob trembled slightly. With a feverish look, she glanced uncertainly from one to the other.

"Yes?" she asked softly.

"Good afternoon, are you Miss Bonnie Newman? You don't have to be afraid of us, ma'am. My name is Henry Crenshaw and this is my son Pete. I'm sorry to disturb you, but we'd like to talk to you about a missing boy. His name is Jupiter Jones."

"Dad!" Pete murmured indignantly, because his father was taking over the conversation without being asked.

"I... I don't understand—" the old lady said.

Pete cleared his throat and took charge of the conversation before his father messed it up further. "Does the name Horatio August mean anything to you?"

The old lady's eyes widened in disbelief. "Horatio?" she breathed and her gaze moved from Pete to his father.

"So you know who I'm talking about?"

Suddenly Bonnie Newman raised her voice. "Why yes, I remember now! Wait a minute, Mr Brown, I'll be right back!"

"Uh... Crenshaw," Pete's father corrected the old lady, but by then she had already went back into the house.

They remained undecided at the doorway until Miss Newman returned shortly afterwards with an old book. She pressed it into Pete's father's hand. "Here's the book you wanted to borrow, Mr Brown," she said aloud.

"But I—"

"You can keep it for a while as long as you bring it back to me sometime. I'd love to invite you in, but I'm baking a cake right now, sorry. Have a good day." Bonnie Newman

gave them a strange look, then closed the door and left them standing outside.

"The poor woman," Pete's father said. "She seems to be confused."

Pete was not convinced. "I don't know, Dad. It seems a bit strange to me."

"Of course it was strange because she was confused."

"I'll just ring the bell again," Pete decided and reached out his hand, but his father stopped him.

"That's not proper, Pete," he said reprovingly. "We shouldn't bother the lady any further."

"But she could help us!"

"You saw she was out of it! She mistook me for a Mr Brown."

"But Dad, even if you're right—she could still help us!"

"No," his father said firmly. "She didn't want to talk to us, we have to respect that." He put the book Miss Newman gave him outside the door and turned. "We're going. Come on, Pete!"

His father walked back to the car, but Pete sensed that something was wrong here. So he rang the doorbell again, but there was no movement inside. He put his hands to the door window and tried to make out something.

"That's enough, son!" his father shouted angrily. "No wonder you are always in trouble when you disrespect other people's privacy like this! There's a limit to this!"

It didn't help—Miss Newman didn't come to the door again and his father was about to explode. Just as Pete was turning away, his eyes fell on the book leaning against the door frame. Quick as a flash, he grabbed it without his father noticing and went back to the car.

"Really," Mr Crenshaw muttered, shaking his head. He only calmed down when they were back in the car and driving off.

Bob's heart beat faster. The tracking receiver! Jupiter had made this device. With the help of a small display, they could locate the mini-transmitters they had also built themselves.

Maybe the First Investigator had the transmitter with him! Maybe they could track him with the receiver! The devices only had a short range, but...

"So, everything still there?"

"Yes, yes," Bob murmured, took out the receiver and switched it on. He stared spellbound at the display, but the little green dot that would have indicated the transmitter did not appear. The familiar beep did not sound either. Disappointed, he put the device back in the backpack.

"Is something broken?"

"No, no, everything's fine," Bob said.

"Tell me, have you ever seen this boy before?" his father asked, showing the harbour master Jupiter's photo.

Silently, the man shook his head.

"Are you sure?"

He nodded.

Bob had meanwhile glanced over the counter. There on the table was a large open book full of handwritten lists and tables. Next to it was a map of the marina with the individual moorings.

"Which boat is usually moored at the very end of the jetty?" Bob asked the harbour master.

"The *Raider*."

"I see. Who owns the *Raider*?"

"I can't tell you that."

Bob's father cleared his throat. "Excuse me, we should explain ourselves. That boy in the photo—he disappeared without a trace. It's possible he was abducted. It could be that the *Raider* has something to do with it."

The harbour master laughed out. "Ha! Like in a detective story, or what?"

"That's right... like in a detective story."

"Still can't tell you who owns the *Raider*, mister," the man repeated, "because I'm not allowed to do so. Privacy rules."

"Listen, my good man! Did you even understand what I said? The boy has been abducted!" Bob's father said, annoyed.

But the harbour master remained unmoved. "Then the police should take care of it, shouldn't they?"

Mr Andrews took a deep breath, but Bob pulled him aside. "Dad," he said. "We should go outside for a minute." Both of them went out of the container office.

"He's being very unreasonable!" exclaimed Mr Andrews.

"Dad, I already know there's no point in going on at him," Bob said calmly. "You have told me many times that in journalism, the compromise of sensitive information can have a potentially disastrous impact. This applies to him as well, so he just can't give us the information directly."

"I guess you're right, son," Bob's father agreed. "Then we should inform Inspector Cotta now. Tell him to come here and get the information out of this guy!"

"We can do that, Dad, but it will take at least an hour for Cotta to get here. We could also cut it short."

"Cut it short?"

Bob pulled his father a little further away and murmured: "You distract the harbour master while I look at his documents—simple as that, because they're on his desk. What do you think?"

But Mr Andrews was not amused. "This is not the right way, Bob. It's morally unacceptable and you know it!"

"Dad, please! Right way or not, do we want to wait an hour for the inspector to come, or do we find out right away who owns the *Raider*?"

15. Bad Moods

On the drive back, Pete and his father were silent. Outside it was slowly getting darker. Only after ten minutes did Mr Crenshaw break the silence when his gaze fell on something Pete had hidden under his left thigh.

“Did you take the book after all?” he asked. “Why did you do that?”

“She gave it to you, Dad,” Pete said irritably. “It would have been rude to just leave it outside the door.”

“Give me the book,” his father said, and Pete did as told. “She mistook me for a Mr Brown, Pete, you heard that very well!”

“That’s nonsense, Dad! I wasn’t allowed to get to the bottom of it because you treated me like an eight-year-old!”

“But—”

“I don’t feel like talking to you about it now, you don’t believe me after all!”

His father started to answer, but then changed his mind. Silence spread again.

After a while, Mr Crenshaw seemed sorry. He glanced at the book cover and tried to make a bit of goodwill with a change of subject. “Mr Brown certainly has good taste.”

Pete hesitated briefly, but he was tired from being in a bad mood so he decided to take up the unspoken peace offering. “What kind of book did she give you?”

“*John Mercury and the Valley of Diamonds* by Hank Cooper.” He showed him the old-fashioned cover, which showed an adventurer who had just dug up a chest full of sparkling diamonds. The dust jacket was already torn in some places.

“Sounds familiar somehow,” said Pete. He thought he remembered some volumes of this series on the bookshelf at home.

“It should be! The John Mercury books were my absolute favourites when I was your age! John Mercury travels the world fighting bad guys, searching for treasure and having the most amazing adventures! I always thought that was great. You definitely get that adventurous spirit from me, but you’re braver than I was back then. No wonder I’m sometimes afraid for you.”

Pete cleared his throat. “Maybe we’ll just go back to Miss Newman’s tomorrow, what do you think, Dad? To bring her the book back?”

“We can do that. Maybe she could get over her confusion by then.”

Pete smiled contentedly. Suddenly his mobile phone rang. He fumbled it out of his trouser pocket.

“You’re not going to answer that while you’re driving, are you?”

“Of course not, Dad,” Pete claimed, although he probably would have done it otherwise. He handed his father the phone. “You answer it. It’s probably Bob.”

“Crenshaw here, speaking for his son, Pete,” Mr Crenshaw answered. “I beg your pardon? ... Oh, I’m sorry, he’s driving at the moment and can’t take a call... Uh-huh... Would you like me to take a message? ... Or can he call you back, okay... and you are Mr White?”

Pete almost wrenched the steering wheel. “No, wait!” he shouted far too loudly, steered the MG into the right lane and stopped at the side of the road. Behind him, a few cars honked,

but Pete didn't even notice. He snatched the phone out of his father's hand.

"Mr White?" he asked breathlessly.

"Pete Crenshaw?" White's voice was low and pleasant. "My secretary informed me that a very excited young man had asked for a call back, and he was supposedly in the company of Solomon Charles."

"Yes, I was," said Pete, "because it's very urgent! It's about a missing boy. His name is Jupiter Jones, and... and it's about a Fiery Eye and... and about Horatio August and—" Pete realized he hadn't given any thought to how to explain this complicated story to Mr White. He took a breath and collected himself. Then he reported everything.

White listened attentively. After Pete finished speaking, Mr White was silent for a short moment before he said: "I am surprised. I work in a historical institute and in my spare time I was just on the trail of a little mystery. I had no idea that anyone else was following the story. I didn't know anything about a missing boy either. We should meet, Pete. You, Bob and me. How soon can you get to Camarillo?"

When Pete reached the California Heritage Institute in Camarillo, it was already dark outside. He had told Mr White that they would be there at eight o'clock. Now it was ten to eight.

The Second Investigator pulled into a small car park where Bob and his father were already waiting. Pete had let Bob know immediately after Mr White's call. However, the Second Investigator immediately noticed that Bob's mood was not the best. He stood leaning against his yellow Beetle with a gloomy face, not looking at his father. Pete also noticed that Bob was holding a backpack. That looked like Jupe's backpack!

"You're already here!" Pete called out as he got out with his father.

Then Bob and his father walked over to the MG.

"Hello Pete, hello Henry," said Mr Andrews, but he didn't look very happy either.

"Is that Jupe's backpack?" Pete asked, pointing at the backpack Bob was holding.

"Yeah," Bob replied. "We found it at the marina. It was with the harbour master."

"That's great for starters!" Pete remarked. "I hope Mr White can tell us more. Shall we go straight to see him?"

Bob glanced at his watch. "We still have a few minutes. Did you find out anything from Miss Newman?"

"Well... it was a bit complicated," Pete murmured, squinting briefly at his father. "What else did you find out?"

"We need to talk," Bob whispered, pulling Pete away. Mr Andrews, meanwhile, joined Mr Crenshaw by the MG.

When they were a good distance away out of earshot, Bob took out the tracking receiver from Jupe's backpack.

"The tracking receiver!" said Pete excitedly. "That's great! But what's the matter, Bob? Why the glum face?"

"My dad's off," Bob grumbled, reporting what they had found out at the marina.

"But at least we now have the tracking receiver," Pete commented. "Perhaps that will give us a lead to find Jupe!"

"Sure, but I wanted to know who the owner of the *Raider* is. Dad and I could have easily figured that out. One of us could have distracted the harbour master while the other took a look at the records, but my father refused! He said it was morally unacceptable! Can you believe it? Instead, he called Inspector Cotta, who is on his way to the marina now. However, we couldn't wait for him, otherwise we would have been too late."

Pete sighed. "It didn't go so well with us either," he said, and now he in turn briefly reported on their visit to Miss Newman.

"Our fathers are setting back the whole investigation," Bob said gloomily. "We have to get rid of them somehow."

"We have to think of something," Pete said. "Do you really think the *Raider* has something to do with Jupe's disappearance?"

"Maybe not, but Jupe drew a question mark at the *Raider's* berth! That must mean something!"

"Cheer up, Bob. We're going to see Mr White now. He'll help us out. I know it!"

Bob nodded. "But only the two of us will meet him!"

Pete glanced over at their fathers. "Do you think they'll let us?"

"We have to convince them."

Bob and Pete went back to the cars. Mr Crenshaw and Mr Andrews interrupted their conversation.

"We're going up there now..." Bob said, pointing to the building that housed the Heritage Institute offices. "Alone."

"Alone? But we had discussed—"

"We have an appointment with Mr White," Bob interrupted his father adamantly. "Just us. If you two come along, he'll only get suspicious."

Mr Andrews laughed. "Are you saying we don't inspire confidence?"

Rather than responding to that question, Bob instead said: "Mr White is not expecting you and so he might not reveal too much if you are there. Perhaps you can wait here. Call if we're not back in half an hour. We're doing this alone now."

"Our sons are growing up, aren't they?" Mr Andrews turned to Mr Crenshaw.

"And quite rebellious," Pete's father agreed. "All right. Agreed. Go alone."

"But keep it decent!" Mr Andrews advised.

"And polite!" added Mr Crenshaw.

"Aye aye, sir!" replied Pete jokingly. Then he turned to Bob. "By the way, Bob, you're not going to bring Jupe's backpack along, are you?"

"Oh, better not," Bob replied and then chucked the backpack into the back seat of Pete's MG.

Relieved, the two investigators left the car park and went to the main entrance.

The California Heritage Institute occupied only the top floor. The other floors were occupied by other offices. In the small entrance hall, a security guard at the reception desk was informed of their visit.

"Mr White is already waiting for you," the man said politely. "Fourth floor."

They took the lift all the way up. As the doors slid apart, a dimly lit hallway with red carpet awaited them. The reception desk was unoccupied, and there was an eerie silence. A series of doors branched off from the hallway, but only one at the very end was open.

Bob and Pete stepped through into a spacious office. Wood, leather and brass dominated the furnishings. There was a massive bookcase, next to it a small liquor cabinet. One wall was dominated by a huge world map. Opposite stood a massive desk.

Mr White stood with his back to the window, his hands resting on the sill.

"There you are! Right on time!"

16. Dangerous Knowledge

White was a man in his sixties, maybe seventies, with aristocratic features and a carefully trimmed beard. A few black strands still shone in the grey of his accurate hairstyle. His dark blue suit was tailored, his handshake strong and warm.

“Gabriel White,” he introduced himself.

“Good evening, sir. I’m Bob Andrews and this is Pete Crenshaw.”

“Thank you for having time for us right away, Mr White,” Pete said. “We have been looking for our friend Jupiter for two days now. You are our last hope!”

“You didn’t come alone?” asked White, nodding towards the window that gave a good view of the car park.

“Oh, you mean our fathers,” Bob realized. “We had a bit of trouble at home. They insisted on coming with us.”

“I see... Well, this meeting is as important to me as it is to you,” Mr White affirmed. “Please sit down!”

They took a seat in a small leather seating area.

“If I had known that your friend was in trouble, I would have contacted you much earlier, of course.”

“Contacted us?” Bob frowned. “But you didn’t even know we existed.”

“Yes, I did—from your friend August August. He told me about you.”

“So he was with you?” asked Bob excitedly.

“Yes. We had a very nice afternoon together on Sunday. You’re probably wondering how I know him at all.”

“Not really,” Pete said, not without pride. “We know that you invited him here to talk to him about his great-uncle.”

“We are alarmed because Gus has also disappeared!” added Bob.

Mr White gasped. “The boy too? But why... what... I don’t understand what’s going on at all!”

“Neither do we,” Pete confessed and then gave a succinct account of Jupiter’s disappearance and their search.

“Mr White,” Bob said, “please tell us your side of the story. What mystery are you on the trail of?”

Mr White nodded. “I am the chairman of the California Heritage Institute. We look after the preservation of California’s oldest buildings and cultural monuments, such as the Spanish mission stations, old fortifications and so on. In my capacity, I am often at archaeology conventions. At one of these meetings, a colleague reported on a recent and significant find in India.”

“The earthquake in Pleshiwar!” exclaimed Bob. “It uncovered previously unknown parts of an ancient palace complex, didn’t it?”

“I am impressed! That’s exactly how it is. In these newly discovered chambers, ancient writings were found that spoke of something that looked very familiar to me, in particular, two items that I had heard before.”

“The Fiery Eye and the Silver Hand,” said Pete. “They once belonged to your old friend Horatio August. Mr Dwiggins and Mr Charles told us about it. You were with them too.”

Mr White nodded. “I’m beginning to understand how you know so much. In a way, you’ve been following my lead.”

“Yes, and we are glad to have found you at last!” said Bob. “By the way, the Silver Hand has since been stolen!” He reported the break-in at Mr Charles’s.

“That’s something!” marvelled Mr White. “Do the police have any leads?”

“Not that we know of,” Bob replied.

White tapped his index finger thoughtfully against his lips. “Then both items have disappeared in the meantime. I have put my contacts in India to work and found out that Mr Rhandur never brought the ruby back to Pleshiwar. No one knows where it is.”

“Interesting,” said Bob, “but what is the secret of these two items? Mr Dwiggins mentioned an archaeological mystery that you were on the trail of.”

Mr White eyed them thoughtfully. He was silent for so long that it was almost uncomfortable. “This is dangerous knowledge. I don’t know if I can let you in on it.”

“Please, Mr White, you must!” Bob pleaded. “Jupiter probably also got onto the trail of this knowledge. In doing so, he has put himself in danger. We believe he got too close to those tribesmen.”

White frowned. “Tribesmen?”

“Well, the Servants of Justice,” said Pete. “They probably not only stole the Silver Hand, but also attacked Mr Dwiggins and abducted Jupiter.”

“We found this at Mr Dwiggins’s,” Bob said, showing Mr White the prayer chain. “On the pendant is an image of Dhaarmikwar, the god of justice.”

“Indeed...” White looked at the necklace. He seemed very thoughtful.

Suddenly a jolt went through his body. It looked as if he had come to a realization that might surprise Bob and Pete.

“You know what’s really amazing?” Mr White asked. “I have come across this Dhaarmikwar image before—not in old books, though, and not in my research on the Temple of Justice. It is in a most unexpected place—here in California.”

“Where exactly?” asked Bob curiously.

“In an old, closed mine—a mercury mine.”

Bob and Pete were electrified.

“Excuse me?” cried Pete. “Not the mercury mine in Elizabeth Lake?”

Now Mr White was the surprised one. “How do you know about that?”

“Because we were there only two days ago—together with Jupiter. It was the last time we were together.”

“Really? Why were you there?”

Pete waved it off. “Jupiter wanted to reopen some old case he had read about. It was pretty far-fetched and also annoyed us quite a bit. Actually—” Pete broke off. “Wait a minute, does that mean that he wanted to go to the mine for a completely different reason? That he was looking for something completely different?”

Realizing the implications of his reasoning, Pete turned his head to Bob. “Did Jupe lie to us?”

“Jupe would never lie to us, Pete!”

“Are you so sure about that?” Pete countered. “It can’t be a coincidence!”

Thoughtfully, Bob shook his head. “No,” he murmured softly. “Actually, it can’t be...” Then he turned back to Mr White and said: “So why were you in that mine, Mr White? And when was that?”

Gabriel White got up from his leather chair, turned his back on them and crossed the office, brooding. "I can't answer you on that... not yet."

"But... but why not?" asked Bob irritably. "You do know something, Mr White! You have to tell us! Please help us find Jupiter and Gus!"

"I will... but I have to check something first."

"But... Mr White, it may be a matter of life and death!" said Pete insistently.

However, Mr White remained silent for a considerable moment. When he turned back to them, his face was expressionless. "Meet me in Elizabeth Lake tomorrow."

"In Elizabeth Lake?" cried Pete. "Do you think Jupiter is there?"

White shook his head. "No. I'm sorry. Tomorrow I will explain everything to you."

Bob and Pete realized that any further pleading would be pointless.

"Can you be there in the morning?" Mr White asked.

"We'd have to skip school again," Pete said. "So no problem. Thank goodness, our fathers will be at work."

"Fine. Ten o'clock?"

Bob nodded. "But the mine is closed this week," he recalled.

White smiled. "Again, that's not a problem for me. There are certain advantages to working for the California Heritage Institute. So I'll see you tomorrow."

17. Something's Beeping

"My head is spinning," Bob muttered as they waited for the lift a moment later. "What does White know? Why didn't he let us in on it?"

"This wretched secrecy!" growled Pete angrily. "That guy is worse than Jupe! I tell you, if he doesn't come clean tomorrow, I'll lock him up in that mine until he talks!"

The lift doors opened.

"What do we tell our fathers?" Bob remembered on the way down.

"Definitely not meeting White in Elizabeth Lake tomorrow morning. That will only lead to endless arguments again."

"Okay. I have a plan to buy some time from them asking us questions," Bob said. "We should be in the same car on the way back so that we can talk about everything. I need to sort out my head."

Pete agreed.

They left the building and met Mr Crenshaw and Mr Andrews again in the car park.

"Exactly half an hour," Pete's father said. "We were just about to call."

"Did you find out anything?" asked Mr Andrews.

"Little," Bob evaded. "White has a few guesses, but he couldn't tell us much."

His father frowned. "Is that all? What exactly did he say?"

Bob could hear by the tone of his voice that his father would not let up unless he told him at least something. "He brought up the mercury mine in Elizabeth Lake."

"Excuse me? The mine?" Mr Andrews wondered. "I thought that had nothing to do with Jupiter's disappearance!"

"We don't understand it either, but we will meet Mr White again tomorrow. Then he will tell us more."

"What more would he want to tell you?" Mr Andrews continued probing.

"Dad, I don't know! It was very confusing," Bob sighed. "Anyway, Pete and I would like to talk things over, so I'll go back in his car. We'll talk about it later, okay?" He smiled conciliatory and dangled his car keys in front of his father's face. "Do you want to take my car?"

Mr Andrews pursed his lips. "Can we fit in the little box, Henry?"

"Of course!" cried Pete's father enthusiastically. "I've wanted to sit in a Beetle again for ages! Because I had one like that a long time ago."

"Well, let's go!" Mr Andrews said. "We'll meet at the salvage yard, all right? Then you'll tell us more! Titus and Mathilda will want to know what you've found out too."

"Agreed," Bob mumbled.

Pete and Bob watched as their fathers squeezed into the cramped Beetle and rolled out of the car park.

"I bet we're faster," Pete said and got behind the wheel of his MG. Sure enough, the Beetle came into view at the next set of traffic lights. After crossing the junction, Pete overtook the Beetle. They were too lost in thought to be amused by Bob's father driving a small car.

“Do you think Jupe really fooled us the whole time we were in Elizabeth Lake?” asked Pete.

“I was wondering about that too,” Bob said. “Secrecy has always been the hallmark of his nature. On the other hand, he usually shrouds himself in silence when he doesn’t feel like letting us in on something... but telling fairy tales is not really his style.”

Pete nodded. “I really thought that our visit to White would bring us a big step forward, but I’m just more confused.”

Suddenly something beeped.

“Something’s beeping,” said Bob. “Is that your mobile phone?”

“Nah,” Pete said. “It’s coming from the back seat.”

A second later, they both shouted: “The tracking receiver!”

Bob dragged Jupiter’s backpack from the back seat and rummaged out the device. “I hadn’t turned it off earlier!” he said breathlessly. “Thank goodness! It’s picking up something! Look, Pete!”

“I have to drive, Bob, I can’t—”

“We’re moving away from the transmitter! Stop the car, Pete, before it’s out of range! Stop the car!”

“Yes, yes!”

Pete pulled over and they both stared spellbound at the display. A flashing green dot showed the position of the transmitter. It was moving.

“It’s behind us! We have to turn back! Maybe that’s Jupe! He may have the transmitter and left the receiver for us to find him! Go, Pete!”

“Now stop stressing me out!” Pete said nervously and started up. The car jerked to a stop. “Stalled, darn it, that’s what happens!”

He restarted the engine, stepped on the accelerator, and made a U-turn in the middle of the road. A car honked, but Pete didn’t care. He raced back.

“It’s gone!” cried Bob, startled. “The dot’s gone! Wait, no, there it is again—right at the edge of the screen. You have to go... straight ahead, I think. Yes, straight ahead. It’s getting closer.”

They drove back the same way they had come. The flashing dot beeped closer and closer to the centre of the display.

Suddenly something beeped again. This time it really was from a mobile phone—Bob’s.

“Tell me, have you gone completely mad?”

“Dad!”

“We almost ran into you during your reckless turning manoeuvre! What are you doing?”

“We have to go back! The tracking receiver has picked up a signal!”

“What tracking receiver? The one in Jupiter’s backpack?”

“That’s the one!” Bob said excitedly. “We’re closing in!”

“We’re almost there,” Pete said. He found themselves headed back to where they had left a few minutes ago—just outside the California Heritage Institute building!

“What are we going to do now?” Pete wondered. “Just go towards it?”

“No,” said Bob. “Stay here first. If they really are Jupe’s abductors, we have to be careful.”

“Jupiter’s abductors?” his father shouted on the phone. “Robert, what are you talking about?”

“It’s just my suspicion!” Bob replied. “I can’t be sure yet.”

“But what—”

“Dad!” Bob interrupted him gruffly. “I can’t talk right now! It’s an emergency.”

“An emergency? Should I call the police?”

“No!” said Bob quickly. “Not yet! Stay where you are! We’ll be in touch!”

“But—”

“Trust us!” Bob hung up. “Goodness! This will drive him up the wall.”

Promptly, the mobile phone rang again three seconds later. Bob rejected the call and then switched the phone to silent.

“You’re gonna be in big trouble,” Pete remarked.

“Never mind,” Bob said. “Better a little trouble than our fathers showing up here at the most crucial moment!”

Pete agreed and asked Bob to switch off his mobile phone as well. “What does the receiver say?”

“The target is no longer moving, and we are not far from it.”

“The car park,” Pete whispered. “The transmitter is in the car park!”

“We’re getting out,” Bob decided.

Watchful and cautious, they approached the car park area. It was surrounded by high bushes so they couldn’t see anything until they were right next to the driveway.

“There!” whispered Pete. “A white van! The lights are on and the engine is running too.”

Bob gasped. “That’s not just any white van, Pete! That’s Tiger Girl’s van—the one she used to escape from the salvage yard earlier today!” Suddenly the vehicle rocked and a dark shadow fell out of the side door.

“Hey!” A yell echoed through the night.

Hands grabbed the figure and pulled it back into the van.

“Someone’s trying to escape from the van!” gasped Bob. “Should we intervene?”

“It’s now or never!” Pete decided. “They’re not expecting us! Let’s get them, Bob!”

18. "Here You Are!"

Pete sprinted off. He came close to the van when the sliding door was swung shut from the inside. However, a moment before, he saw who had been dragged back into the van!

"Mr White!" shouted the Second Investigator. Then the engine howled and the van shot forward.

"Pete!" gasped Bob. "Look out, they're doing a U-turn!"

"They've abducted Mr White!" Pete was blinded by the headlights.

"Take cover!" Bob shouted and pushed Pete out of the way. The white van sped past them and onto the road with screeching tyres.

"That was close!" gasped Pete. "Come on, back to the car! We have to follow them!"

When they reached the road, the van was just racing around the next bend. Bob and Pete ran to the MG, jumped in and drove after it. The receiver beeped.

"They think they've lost us!" cried Pete triumphantly. "They don't know about the tracking device!"

"Then make sure it stays that way, and keep your distance!" Bob advised.

Immediately Pete stepped off the accelerator.

"What exactly did you see?" asked Bob.

"Mr White," Pete said, "only briefly, but I'm quite sure it was him."

"There were two people in the front," Bob added. "The headlights were a bit blinding, but I could see clearly that the man driving had black hair and dark skin. Sitting next to him was Tiger Girl!"

"So... Tiger Girl is one of them?" Pete wondered. "The Servants of Justice?"

"We could be right..." Bob said. "Jupe got too close to them and they've held him prisoner ever since. Now they've waylaid Mr White to squeeze everything he knows out of him. Somehow, Jupe was able to stick a tracking transmitter on their van."

Pete nodded. "Quite possibly."

Bob stared at the display and directed Pete through the streets. They always kept enough distance, but never ran the risk of losing the van.

Soon they had reached the outskirts of the city and were moving along a highway through the mountainous hinterland. The traffic became so thin that the red tail lights of the van soon came into view. The further they drove, the stronger their suspicions became as to where the journey was heading. It was not until the van put on its indicator at the Elizabeth Lake exit that they had certainty.

"So they are really going to the mine!"

"Careful now, Pete!" admonished Bob. "They mustn't realize that they're being followed!"

Pete dropped back even further. The exit led onto a lonely country road. At a junction, there was a signpost showing the direction to the mine. From here, it was only a short distance to the narrow bumpy and sandy track which they had driven on only a few days ago. Soon, they saw the van turning into the track, but Pete did not follow them.

"If we follow them on this track, they will notice it immediately. There is a second access road from the other side! It's only five minutes by car!"

“Good idea,” Bob said.

Pete remained on the country road which led them to the outskirts of the town of Elizabeth Lake. There, the road curved around a little. For a moment, he feared he had lost his way. Then he found the right road that brought them back to the mine, but this time from the east instead of the west. Here too, there was only one sandy track.

“Don’t drive too close to the mine,” Bob warned. “They can see our headlights a long way off!”

Pete brought the car to a halt at the edge of a slope. They got out. In front of them was parched hilly land. The moonlight was just enough for them to vaguely make out the buildings of the mine in the distance.

“Let’s go!” Pete whispered and started moving. Bob took one last look at the display to make sure that the tracking transmitter was where they expected it to be and that it was no longer moving. Then he switched off the receiver and followed the Second Investigator.

It was eerily quiet out here. Nothing was moving and the main road was just far enough away to be perceived only as a distant murmur. Everywhere were stones, hollows and thorny undergrowth. Despite the moonlight, they stumbled almost blindly from one obstacle to the next. The path was clearly more difficult than they had thought. They had also underestimated the distance to the mine. The old mine buildings did not seem to get any closer.

“That was a stupid idea, Bob,” Pete growled softly.

“What idea is stupid? Coming from the other side? To park the car so far off?”

“Everything. What if the gangsters surprise us out here? Tiger Girl, the driver and at least one more person—they’ll easily overpower us!”

“But they don’t know we’re here at all,” Bob assured the Second Investigator. “If we are careful, they will never—”

Bob fell silent, because somewhere in front of them a vehicle had roared. The engine almost over-revved. Headlights scanned across the steppe landscape.

“The van!” shouted Pete. “They’re getting away!”

In fact, all they could see now were the red tail lights.

“Damn it!” cursed Pete. “It will take us forever to get back to my car! We’ll lose them!”

Surprisingly, the van suddenly made a U-turn and headed in their direction. It came so fast that it bounced and rocked on the uneven ground, causing little stones to splash to the side.

“Pete! Something’s wrong,” Bob muttered. “The... the van’s coming right at us!”

“You’re right,” Pete said and ran off.

They ran like rabbits, jumped over every bush and stone, stumbled, almost fell but they kept on running.

Of course they had no chance against the van. The glaring beam of the headlights enveloped them. Just as Pete was about to leap behind a bush, all of a sudden, the vehicle braked hard. On the sandy gravel, the van lurched and turned sideways before coming to a stop.

“You on the left, me on the right!” Pete shouted. “Then they’ll only get one of us!”

“Okay!” Bob yelled back.

The very moment they were about to set off, the driver of the van rolled down the side window.

“Oh, here you are! I’ve been looking for you everywhere!” cried Jupiter.

*To be continued in
Part II: The Silver Hand.*